終末なにしてますか？忙しいですか？救ってもらっていいですか？
Volume 2
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Chapter 1: A Now Distant Dream - A

Transportation magic isn't really as convenient as society makes it out to be. Connecting two distant places by spell veins through a magic procedure, opening up a sort of pseudo physical hallway, and moving 'luggage' through. The process of delivering resources or people to faraway places where they might originally have taken a few months to reach can be greatly shortened -- okay, well if you just hear that much it does indeed seem like the stuff of dreams. You might even feel like it could be called the peak of humanity's technological advancement.

But of course, the world is not that lenient. You have to change where the ceremony takes place based on the positions of the sun and moon, the magicians performing the ceremony all have to conjure magic up to their uppermost limits or else nothing happens, and if you transport a living being an extreme burden is placed on it. Anyway, in the shadows behind this dream technology lurks ugly, harsh reality.

Because of all that, only two kinds of people in this land can have the pleasure of experiencing transportation magic: messengers who need to relay vital information as fast as possible, and the utmost elite soldiers or adventurers who can change the tides of battle.

-- An abandoned mountain hut, on the outskirts of the Tifuana District, near the borders of the empire's territory.

"Weren't we supposed to meet at noon?"

Inside of the hut, three men and women are gathered. One of those three, Willem, looked around the room with a tired face. No matter how many times he checked, there were still only three people, including him. The number of faces he could count was about four short of what it should be.

“The others showing up late? Slackers…”

“Whoa whoa wait a second. You don’t get to go around saying that! You yourself didn’t even get here until the sun started to set!”

“Well, if you two keep quiet about that, the other four will never know.”

“And why the hell do you think we would do that!? Even if we cover for you, the truth doesn’t change, and in the first place we don’t have any reason to do that!”

“Alright alright whatever but don’t shout so loud, Suwon. I’ve still got a headache from crossing the entire continent with that transport magic.”

“And who’s fault do you think that is!?” After raising his voice one more time, the young thaumaturgist, Suwon, sagged his shoulders.

Sporting fluffy blond hair with light blue eyes and a rather pretty face on a lean figure, he would probably get a fair amount of attention from the ladies with his appearance, but, well, no matter the time nor place, he can always be found wearing his oversized pure white cloak. It’s so long that the bottom drags on the ground behind him and, well anyway, a lot’s going to waste there.

“It always ends up like this when I talk to you. No one else rubs me the wrong way as much as you do -- ‘Black Agate Swordmaster’.”

“I keep telling you to stop calling me that.”

“Again with the nonsense. It sounds cool, what’s not to like? Well, although it’s cool, it doesn’t even come close to my name, ‘Magus of the Polar Star’. But I’m just that much better than you, so it really can’t be helped.”

“Okay, I think it’s about time for you to shut up. My headache’s getting worse for a whole different reason now.”

“Hey, what are you trying to say!?”

Suwon continued his complaining, but not paying attention any longer, Willem turned to the other person in the room.

“So you ended up coming, huh? Leila.”

“Hm? Wha -- hmhmmhm -- mean?” While chewing a biscuit, the girl raised her eyes up from the book she was reading and mumbled an incoherent mess. Her red hair, which had the color of a burned brick, shook slightly.

“I said it was okay to run away, remember?”

“Ah, talki -- hmhmhm -- that again?” Munching up the last bits left in her mouth, she continued, “It’s not like there’s any other way… if I don’t do it, who will?”

“I will.”

“Here you go again. You know you can’t.”

Willem fell silent. Being hit with the plain and simple truth, no sugar coating whatsoever, he had nothing to say in return.

“Well my bad, going out on the battlefield so casually. It’s just, you know, I’m a prodigy overflowing with unprecedented talent,” Leila said sarcastically, then broke out in a cackle.

With no words but still a bitter taste in his mouth, Willem groaned. “As usual, you--”

“You? While the country is in ruins, I still happen to be of proper royal blood, you know? Show some respect.”

“Fine, fine. As usual, it seems Your Highness’ personality today is rotten to the core.”

“Aw, well it must be that your rottenness is spreading to me. I guess you really do need to choose your friends wisely.”

“Hmm, is that so? Well I guess you won’t be needing these then,” Willem said as he took a bag of cookies out of his pocket and waved them in front of Leila’s face. “Almaria said ‘share them with everyone’ and made me bring them, but I have no obligation to share it with non-friends.”

“Ally’s cookies!?” Leila sprung forward. “We’re best friends for life, right Willem?”

“From personality to just about everything else, you really have nothing about you to praise, but I respect how fast you can change your attitude.”

“Well if you respect me enough, maybe you can give me that daughter of yours, father?”

“Can’t give my kid away to someone as dangerous as a Brave.”

“Hmph, well I guess it can’t be helped then.”

Right as she finished her sentence, Leila snatched the bag and dumped all the cookies out into a container.

“It’s for everyone, so leave some for Emi and the others.”

“I know, I know,” Leila replied mindlessly, then started stuffing her face with cookies. A split second later, Suwon shouted ‘not fair!’ and promptly joined in.

“You guys…” The usual meaningless banter with friends. “... so…”

“Hm?”

“Why do you fight, Leila?”

“That question again? It doesn’t really matter, does it? Humans can stand on a battlefield without any particular reason and, with some talent, fight well enough. That’s good enough for me.”

“Well if you’re being honest, then of course that’s good enough. I don’t agree, but I can accept it. From the way you say it, though--”

“It seems like I’m lying? About what?”

If Willem knew the answer to that question, he wouldn't have had any problems in the first place.

“See?” Leila said smugly as he failed to respond. “All you need to do is be quiet and follow behind me. Also, you could take care of Seniolis’ maintenance and give me those massages. Your existence isn’t worth much more than that anyways, so just keep your head down and do the things you’re actually capable of.” She gave another smug little *hmph* as she finished her rant.

Willem could say nothing in return, despite having many things he wanted to say. For example, Leila’s always smiling face looked like it was about to start crying -- but he didn’t know why, so he couldn’t point that out. No matter how much time they spent together fighting or just goofing off like now, he could never tell what Leila was thinking.

“So…”

“Hm? What is it this time?”

“I really don’t like you much after all.”

“Ah.” A wide smile spread across Leila’s face. “I know!” she exclaimed in an oddly proud voice.

What Leila was thinking about, or what she was hiding, Willem never got a chance to find out.

Chapter 2: Those Who Have yet to Come Home and Those Who Continue to Wait

Part 1: Long After

Recently, rumors have been going around that rain is leaking into the hallway on the second floor. A quick visit confirmed that some carpentry work was indeed necessary. Someone could be called in from town on a later day, but for now it could use some rough patching up. Which meant he needed some wooden boards and a--

“-- Hey, do you know where the wooden hammer is?” He turned around to discover that his question had been directed at absolutely no one.

Well that’s strange…

Up until now, a young girl with sky blue hair had always been at his side. It had become such a regular thing that he took for granted that she was still there now and asked her a question, but…

"Kutori?" He called out her name, but no answer returned. An uncomfortable feeling began to swell up in his chest. "Aiseia? Ren?" He also tried calling the names of Kutori's two closest friends, but again no one was there to respond.

He decided to take a break from fixing the roof leak and search for the girls. Around and around the building. From one end of the first floor hallway to the other. The reading room. The playroom. The storage room for training equipment. The kitchen and the cafeteria. He climbed up to the second floor and diligently checked each room.

Outside. Around the forest. Around the swampland. He went all the way to town and peeked in every store. The bookstore. The clock shop. The theater. The accessory shop. The cafe. The butcher. They weren't there. They weren't anywhere.

He grabbed every fairy he saw and tried asking, but the answers he received were all the same. Haven't seen them. I don't know.

Right as he began to ask himself what the hell was going on, someone tapped on his back. Turning around, he saw a tall Troll woman -- Naigrat was looking at him with a melancholy smile.

"It's time for you to accept it already," she said gently. "They're already dead."

-- *What?*

"You won't find those girls anywhere."

What's she saying? Is this a joke?

This group of floating islands known as Regul Aire verges on destruction rather frequently. The cause, apparently, stems from the wasteland below, up from which numerous invaders ride the wind and drift onto the islands. And fighting against those invaders requires ancient superweapons, and activating those weapons requires the fairies, who have the appearance and soul of young girls. On top of their tiny shoulders rests the fate of the entirety of Regul Aire. A twisted and unstable world. A world which has no certain future. A world of the end.

"Did you forget? You saw them off to battle."

Of course he remembered. There was no way he could forget. But he made a promise. If she lived and returned home, he would listen to one request. When he told her to survive and come home, she broke out into a smile and replied 'leave it to me'. So there's no way she…

"You better get used to it soon. In this world, it's just an everyday occurrence." A kind and tender voice, like that of a mother trying to comfort her upset child.

How long they had been there he didn't know, but, following Naigrat's eyes, Willem noticed four small fairies gathered nearby. For some reason, those little ones, the carefree girls always running around and causing a ruckus, were all standing in a line perfectly still and silent. With artificial like expressionless looks, the four stared straight at him. In each of their thin arms, they carried familiar swords. They all opened their mouths at the same time and said, "I'm going now."

At that moment, a strong wind blew. He instinctively covered both eyes with his arms. But when he opened them again, the four figures were already gone. In their place, a single

white feather of unknown origin floated down in front of his eyes. Right as it was about to touch the ground, however, a strong wind blew again, carrying the feather off to some faraway sky.

"You should get used to it." Naigrat repeated those words once more, then closed her mouth.

Wait. Is this a joke? He should get used to it. He understood that much. But what, exactly, should he get used to? Kutori, Aiseia, Nephren. Where were they? When would they come home? Those four that were just here, Collon, Lakish, Panival, Tiat. Where did they go off to with those swords? What did they go off to do?

He found no answer to any of his questions. Of course, even if he did find answers, he wouldn't be able to accept them. Running away from reality. A childlike tantrum. No matter what others said, he would never be able to accept them.

"Face reality."

No. Stop that. Don't give me that garbage.

If that was reality, then he didn't want to look at it anymore. So Willem closed his eyes, plugged his ears, and, to stop his mind from wandering to anything else, began to recite the names of the Regal Braves in his head. All those names he memorized as a child started to wash away the unnecessary thoughts. Abel Melkera. Tolben Shunol. Wecker of the Aromatic Jade. The Nameless One in Black.

"Tira Noten. Wiley of the Rotten Blade…"

He opened his eyes and stared at the blurry ceiling above for a few seconds. Looking over at the window and confirming that the morning light was shining through the beige curtains took another few seconds.

"The Stranger Nils, Leila Asprey…"

Pushing aside his blanket, he sluggishly sat up and cracked his neck. After taking some time to grasp his current situation,

"Well thank god that was all just a dream!" he exclaimed in a tearful voice, and buried his head in his hands.

Not everything inside the dream was a lie. It's true that this world, Regul Aire, exists on top of a layer of thin ice. And it's also true that this layer of thin ice is being supported by a bunch of antiques and the young girls who wield them.

Kutori, Aiseia, Nephren. Those three girls departed for a harsh battlefield. And he, the manager of the fairy soldiers (at least that's what his official title was), Willem Kumesh, saw them off. All also true.

And there's one last point in that dream which was faithful to reality.

Since the battle started, half a month has passed.

The girls have yet to return home.

Part 2: On This Side of the Silver Screen

Two lizards, or rather two lizard people, stood facing each other with romantic looks in their eyes. One of them had a muscular physique and wore an army uniform with a stand up

collar. Based on all that, this one was probably the male. And the other, who wore an elegant dress, was most likely the female.

They simply looked at each other, exchanging no words.

A historic looking stone town filled the background. The pair stood on top of a large arched aqueduct which brought water to the city.

The sun had set long ago; only the unsteady light of a single gas lamp cut them out of the surrounding darkness. Inside of their world no other humans could be found -- well that's obvious. Rather, no other living beings could be spotted. It was as if the world had gotten up and disappeared off somewhere while leaving only those two behind.

The male lizard did something with his tongue inside his mouth, creating a weird sound.

The female lizard opened her eyes wide and continued staring.

From those wordless actions alone, some kind of mutual understanding must have passed between them. They gently drew their bodies close together and confirmed each other's warmth -- so cold blooded animals have this custom too, huh.

And then, as if trying to protect the lovers' secret meeting, the gas lamp flickered once before going out completely. The darkness of night reached out, softly enveloping the couple, and the story came to a quiet end.

With a snap, the light of crystal lamps filled the movie theater as the day's showing finished.

"Hm." Panival nodded with a know-it-all look on her face.

"Ooo…" Collon had a look of admiration.

"Ahh…" Tiat's eyes seemed to be sparkling.

"..." Lakish stared with her mouth wide open.

A rare spectacle, the four little ones, who can usually be found energetically running about the fairy warehouse, all sat quietly, fixated on the now blank screen with deeply moved expressions. Off to the side, Willem sat alone, hand pressed against his forehead, fighting a light headache.

… I don't get it…

Well, for starters, he could understand that the film was supposed to be some kind of love story. Anything beyond that, though, he had no idea.

In the first place, any sort of romance is supposed to make you empathize with one of the characters, or at least have some pretty actors and actresses to admire. But if all the characters in a movie are Reptrace, it's a little too hard to accomplish either.

The race wall really is thick after all.

Recording crystals, as their name implies, are a special type of quartz able to capture and store the surrounding scenery. The accuracy and capacity of each stone changes based on the preciseness and type of the cut, and also the size and quality of the original gem. By shining light with uniform direction and wavelength upon the stone, recorded scenes can be projected outside, and slightly adjusting the angle of the light makes it possible to choose which images to project. Through this process, a series of scenes can be played in sequence, creating moving images which almost look like real life. The necessary equipment not being too expensive,

medium sized crystals or smaller can often be found in image crystal theaters throughout any city.

Well, enough of the technical talk. The important point is just that such technology exists in Regul Aire, and that a whole subculture revolving around these recorded films is quickly developing.

Even without going all the way to a big city theater, you can see whatever performance you want in any old place furnished with these recording crystals. The theaters might not have sound, and the image quality may not be the best, but it's a large step up from nothing at all. These sort of places have played a large role in spreading fiction across Regul Aire, but…

With the four little ones trailing behind, Willem exited the theater.

"It was lovely!" Tiat screamed, the sparkling in her eyes beginning to spread out into the air around her.

"Adult!!" Collon continued the screaming with some nonsense.

"Hmmph!" Panival proudly raised her shoulders and struck an intimidating pose.

"One day, I too…" A spellbound Lakish gazed off into the distance.

"... uh…" Willem sagged his shoulders with a sigh.

Not much time has passed since these four were 'born'. Physically and emotionally, they were children no more than ten years of age. So when entering a theater, they need to be accompanied by a guardian, which is how Willem ended up in this situation.

"I'm exhausted…"

The girls' appearances, lacking any horns, fangs, scales, or animal ears, fall into the category of markless, closely resembling the Emnetwyte who once flourished on the land below. The only difference is the vivid color often present in their hair and eyes.

Having said all that, how in the world could they be so moved by watching a lizard love story? Could it be the gender difference? Age? Or the time in which they were born? Maybe everyone else in Regul Aire would also enjoy the story, and he was the only oddball?

There's no hope for this generation…

"Um, is something wrong?" He heard a worried voice from below. Panival was looking up at his face, probably thinking he looked a little funny.

"Willem, cheer up!"

He thought he felt something jump onto his back, and, next thing he knew, Collon had her arms and legs locked around his right shoulder and elbow joints. She really was quite agile with those tiny limbs of hers.

"Yeah! Put some spirit into it, spirit!"

"Hm, now if you just get his carotid artery too, it'll be perfect."

"N-N-No!! Collon, hurry up and get off! Panival stop encouraging her!!"

Ahh, Lakish is a good kid. Collon and Panival are bad kids. Well, for kids, being energetic is the most important, so in that respect they're all good kids. By the way, this really hurts… how do I get out of this? Such thoughts vaguely ran through Willem's head, which had still not fully recovered. Just then, he felt a pair of little eyes staring at him and turned around to face the last of the four girls.

"What's wrong, Tiat?"

"Eh?"

“Thinking about something?”

Being unexpectedly called out, Tiat had a confused face for a moment. “Oh… it’s just… you haven’t been very happy lately, so I was thinking maybe it’s because of our seniors… or something…”

“Seniors? Ah, Kutori and the others?”

“Y-Yeah…”

I see. Seniors, huh? He felt it was a little bit of an unnatural way to refer to people that were basically family, but, in the end, these fairies were soldiers in the army -- or rather, army equipment. Using a respectful expression like that to refer to their elders wasn’t that strange.

“Yeah, I suppose.” He responded honestly, seeing no point in hiding anything.

“Eh…” For some reason, Tiat sounded surprised.

“To tell the truth, I can’t keep my mind off it. I even had a weird dream this morning because of them still not coming back.”

“A dream?”

“Ahh…”

Tiat’s, and even Lakish’s too for some reason, expression lit up. Those were the same faces he had seen staring in wonder at the lizard love story not too long ago.

“... wait a second. What are you guys imagining right now?”

“Waiting and waiting for the return of a loved one, trying to conceal the pain. Right?”

“Wow… an adult romance…”

He had no idea what those two were saying.

“Ohh, a lively adult!”

“A naked confession in the middle of a highway? A brave manager, indeed.”

He had even less of an idea what these other two were saying. Also, his locked right arm was starting to really hurt.

“It’s only natural to be concerned for family… it doesn’t have to be some big love affair. Aren’t you guys even the least bit worried about them?”

“Why would we be?”

“Why? I mean…”

“They’ll make it home safely without us worrying about them. And if something happens so that they can’t make it home, then us worrying won’t do anything to help,” Tiat explained casually.

Ah -- that’s right. These guys are fairies. They exist only to be used up in battle. Because of that, their attachment to life tends to be thin, and apparently that indifferent attitude applies not only to their own life, but to others of their kin as well.

Kutori must have been a pretty rare exception. She said herself that she didn’t want to die. And, despite never speaking the words directly, her attitude showed that she didn’t want to expose her cute juniors to danger.

Willem saw that fear of hers as a good thing. Compared to Willem, who failed to see any worth in his continuing to exist, Kutori had a much more ‘humanlike’ way of living. He didn’t realize it back then, but that may have been one of the reasons he supported her so much.

“That’s not the point of worrying.” Still unable to move his right arm, Willem twisted his body and managed to put his left hand on top of Tiat’s head. “Sooner or later you guys will understand too.”

“H-Hey! Don’t treat us like we’re little kids!”

“Kutori worried about you guys, you know?”

“... Kutori? Why?”

“Because she’s an adult? Or at least, more of an adult than you guys.”

Tiat puffed her cheeks and, in an irritated voice, declared to the blue sky, “Fine! I’ll worry about the seniors then!”

“Ohh!” Collon, obviously not really understanding what was going on, gave a little cheer.

“Good luck,” Panival responded casually, not seeming to care.

“Adult… Kutori’s an adult even in Willem’s eyes too, huh…” Lakish mumbled something with a dazed look on her face. He pretended to not hear.

“Anyways, Collon -- pretty soon my ligaments are going to break or something so get off.”

“I still haven’t heard a surrender!”

“Ahh I give up I give up.”

“Oh!” With that, Collon hopped off.

A chilly wind blew through town, causing Willem to shiver.

The sky high above harbored only a few clouds.

Slow, but surely, the seasons had begun to change.

The facility sat deep inside the forests of the 68th Floating Island. Just from its looks, you might guess it was some sort of dormitory, able to house around fifty people. A two floored building, the wooden structure gave off a somewhat antiquated feel. Right beside it were a vegetable garden and flower bed, both well tended to, and a little farther away, a small clearing served as a multipurpose grounds.

According to official documents, the facility served as a warehouse for the storage of the army’s secret weapons. Besides a minimal number of people needed to manage the equipment, supposedly no one lived inside.

Of course, this last point isn’t true at all. Over thirty fairies currently call this facility their home. The young girls, merely ‘objects’ according to the documents, live out their days with an enthusiasm and energy uncharacteristic of inanimate weapons.

On the roof of that ‘warehouse’, numerous hung up washed clothes flapped about in the wind.

“Aw, the weather looks like it’s about to get bad.” Holding a bundle of sheets to take inside by her chest, a woman gazed up at the sky. “Hey, delicious looking person over there. If you’re free, give me a hand, will you?”

“I’ll help, so don’t call me that again.”

“Ehh? In my culture, it’s the highest compliment, you know?”

“Well, then your whole race needs to go relearn the common language from scratch right now.” While exchanging some light banter, Willem picked up a nearby wicker basket and began stuffing it with partially dried clothes.

The wind blowing by carried just a hint of moisture. Rain did indeed seem imminent.

“Hmm, I feel like you’ve been a bit cold towards Trolls recently, Willem,” the woman said, puffing out her cheeks like a pouting young child.

Willem grimaced slightly at her gesture, noticing that it looked strangely attractive. Naigrat is included in the above mentioned ‘minimal number of people needed to manage the equipment’. She looked to be about twenty years old and was fairly tall for that age, her eyes resting at basically the same height as Willem’s. Still retaining some of the tastes of a little girl, she liked to wear cute aprons or frilly dresses. And, of course, she was not a fairy, but rather a Troll, a sub-race of Ogres that lived beside people, exchanged smiles with people, and ate people.

“Don’t be stupid. I’ve been cold to you ever since we first met.”

“So mean… I think a guy who can say that kind of stuff seriously to girls will get into some trouble…”

In the sky above, faint gray clouds began to spread out. It looked like they better hurry. On top of the mountain of sheets and clothes already about to overflow out of the basket, he began piling on even more.

“You don’t need to worry. The only person in the world I can take this attitude towards is just you now.”

“Hmph. A rather strange pickup line, don’t you think? Maybe my heart did flutter a little.”

“Like I said, your whole race needs to go relearn the common language.”

“You were so nice to Kutori and the others, but this is what I--”

With a plop, a drop of rain fell by Willem’s feet, creating a gray stain on the ground.

“Move your hands, not your mouth. Come on.”

“I know, I know!”

The two hurriedly continued their work taking down clothes.

A violent downpour started, as if someone up there suddenly decided to flip over a giant bucket of water. In a matter of seconds, clouds so deeply gray they looked black covered the entire sky. Despite it still being early in the day, the view outside the window was dark as night.

“Barely made it, huh? If we took just a little longer, we would have needed to wash everything all over again.” Having cleaned up all the laundry, the pair had relocated to Naigrat’s room to have some tea and relax. “Well? What do you need?” Naigrat asked suddenly as she ignited a flame in the fireplace.

“Huh?”

“You came up to the roof because you had some business with me, didn’t you?”

“Ah…” Now that Naigrat mentioned it, Willem remembered. “Well… how to put it… I was just thinking that it should be about time for some kind of contact, at least whether they’re safe or not.”

“Ah. Kutori and them?”

Of course. Silently, Willem nodded.

“I think I told you before, but this battle is going to take especially long.”

“Well yeah I heard that, but it’s already been half a month, you know? Haven’t you heard anything about whether or not they’re still safe, or how much longer it looks like it’ll continue?”

“Nope.”

“Instant rejection! Why?”

“Why? That’s just how it is… do you want to know the details?”

Without responding, Willem sat down in the chair Naigrat offered him. As if magically pulled out from somewhere, a tea set laid itself out on top of the small table.

“You know about their enemy, the Teimerre, right?”

“I learned a little from documents. It’s tough, its size and strength are directly proportional, but most other properties are unknown.”

“That’s right. The main cause of that toughness is its ability to quickly grow and split. Even if you keep killing and killing, the surviving parts will use the dead ones as shields while creating more of themselves. Not only that, but they get stronger every time. Against the average smaller ones, if you patiently kill each part around ten times they’ll reach their limit and stop splitting. This one, though, might have even more than two hundred layers, so it’s going to take a while.

Of course, the girls aren’t fighting 24/7. They knew it was going to be a long battle, so preparations are in place. A formidable Reptrace artillery squad accompanied them in order to buy some rest time for the girls. I want to tell them to just fight with those muscular lizards, but only the fairies wielding the ancient Kaliyons can inflict any meaningful damage to the Teimerre. And, of course, that’s the whole reason for the girls’ existence, so I guess it can’t be helped.

Since they decided to not make Kutori open the gate to the fairy homeland, this battle is simply a matter of continuing to kill until that last shell falls off. However, there’s no way to tell exactly how many layers the monster has, or how many they’ve destroyed so far, so naturally they can’t predict how much longer the battle will last.

Well, even so, it’ll end eventually. They have the advantage in fundamental military strength, so there’s a pretty good chance of winning.” Naigrat ended her explanation on a lighter note.

“But still, you’d think they could at least tell us if the girls are still alright or not.”

“They have a sort of restrictive barrier spread out around the battlefield, so communication crystals won’t get through. On top of that, the air currents around the island are acting strangely, so they’re not going to ask someone with wings to try and fly out. Looking in at a distance, about all you can tell is that the battle is still going on,” Naigrat went on while twirling her red hair around with her fingers. “Well there’s other factors too, but that’s the basic gist of why there hasn’t been any news about the girls. I asked the same thing when I first came here, and the answer I received was basically exactly what I just told you. Anything else you want to know?”

“No…” Disappointed, Willem dropped his shoulders. “You seem pretty calm right now. Used to it?”

Naigrat let out a big sigh. “Nope. Even now I’m sick with worry. I haven’t had any appetite at all recently.” Willem silently rejoiced at hearing this last point. “At any rate, the little ones around here continue going about their daily business. As the older one, I can’t go around causing a panic, right?”

“Well, I guess you’re right.” Steam began to billow out from the kettle in the fireplace. Watching Naigrat scurrying about preparing the tea in the corner of his eye, Willem went on. “I

had no idea it was this painful… not being able to do anything but wait," he grumbled in a sulky voice.

Hearing his complaint, Naigrat painted a smile on top of her anxious expression and replied, "You know, I heard from Grick that you said a pretty cool line at first. That you believe in them, so you're ready to accept whatever outcome they bring about, or something."

"Not just at first. I'm still determined to do exactly that. It's just… I didn't expect it to go on for so long. It's not really anxiety or that I can't calm myself down or anything, I'm just starting to wonder about it."

"Just wondering about it?"

"Just wondering about it. Something bad about that?"

"Not good or bad, but the calm and cool character you're trying to play is starting to break down." She thought for a moment. "Ah, I see. You're the type that can't act tough outside of your comfort zone, aren't you?"

"..."

"So when you're in an unfamiliar situation you don't know what to do and sort of just wander around confused. Typical of a guy with low self confidence."

"..."

She could have phrased it in a nicer way, but sadly Willem couldn't object. Naigrat crossed her arms on the table and rested her chin on top, staring at him playfully.

"Running around flustered and lost, sometimes giving in and being overwhelmed… just watching you recently has been interesting."

Again, her words seemed to gouge his heart. "You really are an ogre…"

"Of course. You said something mean to me a little while ago, so I'm just getting you back." She stuck her Troll tongue out teasingly. "Even though you treat me like a demon, I'll still give you some advice. In these kind of times, if you have nothing to do it only gets worse. Try changing your environment or find a way to force yourself to be busy."

"Ah, I see what you're getting at. Now you're gonna ask me to do some kind of job, aren't you?"

"Correct," the demon said with a smile.

Willem thought about it. Their conversation was about 60% joking around, but what the demon lady said did make some sense. Continuing to worry about Kutori and the others by itself wasn't a bad thing. But, he had wanted to keep on living his everyday life as much as possible while waiting for their return, just like how his family had once waited for his return at the now gone orphanage.

In that case, there was some merit in going along with Naigrat's suggestion. In order to be able to steadily wait for those girls and welcome them home as his usual self, he needed to take this step.

"Alright. What are you going to make me do?"

Hearing his answer, Naigrat's face lit up. "It's a little far away, but there's somewhere I want you to go."

Part 3: The Old Capital and Old People

Tiat said she had a dream. A dream in which she was somewhere she had never went before, gazing at sights she had never seen before, talking with someone she had never met before.

Just going by what she said, nothing seemed too unusual. Dreams are just that: dreams. Sometimes they include real events, places, and people from your memories, and other times they show you seemingly random visions completely unfamiliar to you.

But, according to the fairies, this was different. Apparently, sometimes, the moment they wake up, they can just *tell* that the dream they had been having was special. Without any particular logic or reasoning, they become strongly convinced that it was fundamentally different from a normal dream, where you could be comfortable or scared or happy or sad, but no trace remained in reality upon waking.

And so, Tiat's dream turned out to be an omen.

-- *A little far away*, she had said. Thinking about it, the right move would have been to confirm just how far of a distance, exactly, that 'little' referred to. They had spent almost an entire day transferring between different airships and being shaken about by the wind. Completely exhausted from riding on wobbly vehicles for so long, Willem finally arrived at his destination: the city of Collinadiluche, 11th Floating Island.

The smell of stone. That was the first thing he noticed after coming off the ramp of the airship. To be more precise, it was the scent that the stones and bricks had acquired over their long history, the scent of the pavement which had been ceaselessly trampled on, the scent of the animals living there, and the scent of the wind which whistled through the town.

Right beside the harbor district was a large, open area for trading, and it appeared to be the first day of some kind of market. He could see a series of worn canvas tents all lined up orderly. And beyond that, the city stood with its vibrant colors of reddish brown and whitish gray.

A diverse mix of races wandered about the streets, with no obvious majority. If he had to name one, the Lucantrobos seemed to be more numerous than the others, but that was just a gut feeling, not backed up by any sort of counting. Here and there, members of the 'markless' races, like Willem and the girls, could be seen mixed in with the crowd. From the looks of it, there was no need to cover up with a hood or hat.

"... ah." A sigh of admiration unconsciously escaped his lips. "I'm surprised. It's a lot more normal than I imagined." He had heard about this place before. The first city ever founded in Regul Aire, carrying over four hundred years of history. A rare town which, throughout its long history, has never been burned by the fires of war or destroyed by the invaders from the ground below.

Well, after all, Regul Aire is in the sky. There are no elves attacking from the forests and no orcs pushing in the boundaries. No dragons that like to burn homes for fun or Visitors that declare a purge on the entire race of humans. Considering this, the 'never been burned by the fires of war' part kind of loses its rarity factor.

Also, being in the sky means much more limited resources. In particular, digging stones out of a floating island is equivalent to shaving down the space you're living in. Because of this,

stone is a fairly expensive building material. And of course, building an entire city out of stone would be extremely difficult. So Willem thought that even the largest and oldest city in Regul Aire would still be nothing compared to the cities that once thrived on land, but apparently he had greatly underestimated it.

Golems, which had the appearance of barrels that suddenly sprouted arms and legs, ran around restlessly, carrying wooden boxes to and fro. Willem stepped off the road in order to avoid bumping into one, and it said ‘thank you’ in its mechanical voice before running off again. Even programming manners into the golems’ artificial brains… this city really was something special.

First impressions of the bustling tourism and trade center running through his mind, Willem had started to walk off when he noticed that his companion was not at his side. Turning around, he saw Tiat frozen still on the top of the airship ramp, emitting an unusually large amount of sparkle. Her mouth was open wide and her face showed a mix of delight, surprise, and reverence at the sight before her eyes.

“Oi, hurry up and get over here,” he called, but she didn’t show any sign of hearing his words. Her mind had gotten up and flown off somewhere. “Come on.” He walked back up the ramp and poked her forehead with his finger.

“Ow!?”

“Let’s go. I’m tired from sitting on that ship for so long.”

“B-But it’s the 11th Floating Island, you know!? Collinadiluche, you know!? The real thing!!”

“Well, yeah.”

“The place where history gathers! The treasure box of the sky! The stew pot of romance and legends!” She started talking some nonsense rather passionately. Stew pot…? “Many a masterpiece has been set upon this stage!”

“You’re like this practically everywhere besides the 68th Island… every time we transferred ships you had that sparkle in your eyes.”

“But, this is my first time leaving the island… wait, no! This island and this town are special! A whole different level!” she complained desperately, then ran up to Willem’s side.

He could feel attention gathering on them: the looks of reservation directed at the ‘markless’. Or wait, this was different: they were the kind looks of admiration one gives to a charming family passing by. People probably thought they were brother and sister, coming out from their rural home to a big city for the first time .

Well, that wasn’t very far from the truth. Always living off in their own little world, the girls’ view of the larger Regul Aire outside was limited to what they had seen in books or crystal movies. It was only natural that she should be excited just by traveling to a new island. And moreover, it seemed like this particular city happened to be the setting of one of her favorite stories. He could understand her excitement.

“Whatever, let’s go. We didn’t come here to sightsee.” He could understand, but her excitement would never come to an end on its own.

“Aw, come on! Let me enjoy this for at least a little.”

As he tugged on her small hand and started walking off, he could hear giggles behind his back. Now, he was used to standing out in a bad way, but still the attention made him feel uncomfortable.

“Ah, hey, hey. Can I go see that up close!?”

“... what.”

“Falsta Square’s statue of the Great Sage!”

“That means nothing to me…”

Following the girl’s line of sight, he found a large open plaza with a fountain and, standing majestically in the center, a statue of an old man. Willem squinted his eyes and observed the statue in more detail. The old man wore a hood and had a bold, fearless looking face. There might have been many more artistic touches, but Willem could never understand those aspects. Considering that he could never appreciate the subtleties of Emnetwyte art, there was no way he could artistically judge the art of other species. Now, if it was a statue of a woman, he could at least offer some comments from a guy’s perspective, but he wasn’t about to do that with a statue of a grandpa.

“So what is that?”

“It’s a bronze statue of the person that built this city long long ago. It’s a common spot for a secret lover’s meeting! I know because so many stories are set here!”

“Hmm?”

“You know, like the final scene of ‘The Stars and Wind of Collinadiluche’ where ‘Rust Nose’ ate a fried potato!” Well apparently, Tiat also had no interest in the artistic qualities of the statue. “And there’s a legend that if two lovers swear their eternal affection for each other here, it’ll bring them happiness for five years…”

“That’s a pretty dumb legend…” Swear to love each other for eternity, but only get five years of happiness? What happens in the sixth year? Wait, this is not the time to be thinking about this. “No sightseeing. Remember, you came here because you have a duty to fulfill.”

“Ah…”

After hearing Willem’s scolding, Tiat finally gave up. She lowered her left arm that had been flailing around in excitement and drooped her shoulders.

“You want to become an excellent fairy soldier like Kutori, right?”

“Ah, yeah. Yep. Haven’t forgotten.” Staring down at her feet, she shook her right hand free from Willem’s grip and started trudging along. “Let’s go.”

Willem stood still. After walking about ten steps ahead, Tiat noticed and turned around. “What’s wrong?”

“Ah… the airship home leaves tomorrow evening.”

“Yeah? What about it?”

“After we finish up our business… we should have some time to take a long walk.”

“...”

She didn’t seem to understand the meaning of those words immediately. But gradually, Tiat’s obviously disappointed face slowly changed into a broad smile. She scurried back the ten steps that she had walked and grabbed Willem’s hand.

“Come on! No time to be lounging around!”

Alright alright, Miss Princess, got it. Trying to bite back a laugh, he walked forward, his hand being pulled along by Tiat.

Suddenly, a slight feeling of discomfort brushed against the back of Willem's neck. It was the same feeling he had grown used to during his days as a Quasi Brave back on the land: the feeling of malice. And he could sense not just one person, but a few people holding ill will against another group of a few people. That faint tension, always present right before a conflict breaks out, floated about the place. Even so, it didn't seem to be a particularly large scale event, and the malice was not directed at Willem and Tiat.

"What's wrong?"

"Hm? Ah, nothing."

Even though at first glance this place looked to be a peaceful tourist spot, or maybe because of that fact, seeds of trouble seemed to be hidden in the shadows. *Well… I guess it doesn't matter to us*. There was no need to go out of the way to swat away sparks that didn't fall their way in the first place. Willem decided to leave things be and continue through the city, his hand still being pulled along.

Without the Kaliyon, there was no way to resist the 'Beasts' which destroyed the world. But only certain 'chosen' humans could wield the Kaliyon. And even before that problem of being chosen or not chosen, all the Emnetwyte went extinct long ago. Therefore, there was no way to oppose the 'Beasts'; the world was coming to an end.

-- The people of Regul Aire, however, were not obedient enough to accept such simple reasoning. If there were no more Emnetwyte, then all they needed was a substitute, and a suitable possibility just so happened to exist: natural phenomena which in ancient times stuck close to humans, used their tools, and helped with their work. Beings which sprung up as a result of the souls of deceased infants not being able to understand their own death and wandering lost into the world.

Those creatures which used to exist on that world were said to be midgets no taller than an adult human's knees. But up in the current world, they took on a form closer to that of the former Emnetwyte: young girls. The reason for this change in appearance was unclear, but they were convenient to force weapons upon. And, no matter how their figure changed, the inner substance of their being had likely not changed from before. They spring into existence to stay beside people. To help people. To chase the backs of people. To imitate the actions of people. And for those same reasons, they disappear.

"... but even so, not every fairy can wield a Dug Weapon. It seems that they all have the innate ability to, but whether that ability will blossom in their early years is another question."

"Ah…"

His neck hurt a little. The man sitting in front of his eyes was, simply put, a giant. A brawny, muscular giant about twice Willem's height. And moreover, this giant had a bald head and fangs protruding, wore a white gown and black glasses (probably custom made), under which his single eye seemed to sparkle with pure intelligence, and his title read 'Doctor'.

"This is a general treatment facility managed by the Orlandri Company. We have the best equipment and medicine in all of Regul Aire. Any fairy who sees an 'omen' dream comes

here, and we treat her body so that she may fight as a fully grown fairy soldier. Since Dug Weapons are so rare, and their enemies are so strong, nothing good will come of simply letting a fairy whose body hasn't been properly treated hold a sword."

He spoke politely with a gentle voice, and the things he was telling Willem were all perfectly logical. But the Monstrous-like body alone was enough to overshadow all that. He couldn't seem to shake away the discomfort.

"So Tiat… where is she now?"

The room must have been built to fit this guy's body, because the ceiling was ridiculously high. Willem thought that this must be what it feels like for a dog or cat to look up at the world of humans.

"Right now she's having her body examined by female doctors in the room next door."

"And why are you just hanging out around here, if you're supposed to be in charge of her?"

"If I can entrust a job to other people, then I will. When it gets to the point where I can't, then I'll step in. As for now, I wanted to speak with you a little bit, Willem Kumesh." At this, Willem gave the doctor a suspicious look: he had not yet given his name in front of this man. "Ah, no need to be so cautious," the giant continued, waving his hands. "I didn't investigate you through any shady means or anything, I simply heard about you from a letter Nai sent me."

Nai…? Ah, he must mean Naigrat.

"That seems pretty shady to me…"

"Well, that's true if you think about it, I guess." He agrees, huh… Willem was the one who said it first, but now he felt a little sorry for Naigrat. "Anyway, you--"

Cutting off the giant's words, a small explosion sounded in the distance. And then, almost all at once, the sound repeated itself three more times.

"Gunshots?"

"Seems like it. Probably the Order of Annihilation Service History."

"... excuse me? Maybe it's because I'm still not used to the common language or something, but I have no idea what you just said. Annihilation… what?"

"The Order of Annihilation Service History."

"What kind of knight order is that… the name sounds like it was made up by a bunch of teenagers that'll regret their choice in five years or so…"

"It's a group of youngsters going around causing violence in resistance of the current mayor's policies. 'Knight Order' is just a self proclaimed title, but they're backed by the old aristocracy, so they're more legitimate than their name suggests."

"Ah…" The malicious air he felt in the streets earlier must have been that. "At any rate, guns aren't a very pleasant sight. A standoff between the radicals and the traditionalists… something like that?"

"That's the idea. Long ago, this was a purely beast people town, and they tend to have a stronger sense of territory… thinking this city and its history have always been and still are theirs, refusing to get along with other races."

"I see."

History. History, huh? Willem tried to recall the people living in the capital back down on the old world. The city only had a little less than two hundred years of history, but a large number of its residents still held a strong sense of pride or attachment to it.

Pride is essentially the same as arrogance. By relating yourself to something with value, you guarantee your own value and make yourself feel better. You know what they say: any medicine can become poison depending on how you use it. Same with pride: it can turn into either a beautiful or an ugly thing. For better or for worse, you were born into a noble family, and you need to drill this lesson into your head.

Willem tried to shrug away the words of his master which had apparently decided to stop by for a trip through his head. All of his sayings were the same: they continued to cling on to some corner of his brain, refusing to go away. Those words from just now weren't even directed at him originally; he had just happened to be listening off to the side as the master talked to a younger girl disciple.

"I don't think there's anything to be proud of in a town where you can hear gunshots in the middle of the day."

"Well, it's not uncommon for there to be disagreements within a large organization like that. Besides, the guys up top don't seem to have a problem with it, as long as it keeps outsiders away."

"I see." Beginning to understand the situation after a little thought, Willem nodded.

"I guess four hundred years of history must not seem like a big deal to you, who's lived over five hundred years?" Following a brief silence, the giant steered the conversation in an unexpected direction.

"... I'm not arrogant enough to call my five hundred years of doing nothing 'history'."

"So modest."

"Wildly oversleeping isn't something to boast about. Besides..." He faltered.

"Besides… what?" the one eyed Kikuroppe gestured for him to continue with a frightening smile that would definitely make a child cry, or even leave some permanent trauma. Now, Willem wasn't a kid so he didn't get scared or anything, but…

"... nothing." He waved his hands and tried to get off the topic.

"Hmm?" The giant narrowed his single eye, as if trying to peer straight into Willem's heart. "Well, to you, Regul Aire must be like a dream world, where everything just seems made up and lacks reality. I guess four hundred years in that kind of world doesn't have much of an impact."

"That's not what I was saying…"

"Oh, well my apologies." The giant shrugged his shoulders.

Just then, a knock sounded at the door and a Reptrace dressed in a white robe entered the room. The Reptrace, who was a little on the small end of the size spectrum for his race, gave a quick bow to Willem, handed over a few documents to the giant, then once again left the room.

"... the results from Tiat's examination have arrived."

"Am I allowed to hear them?"

"Of course. I was just about to tell you. Let's see..."

He adjusted his glasses and began to read aloud, adding his own commentary. Her body development was going as expected for her age, with no shortcomings with regards to health. However, there were two minor problems: a little damage to the digestive organs from too much milk intake, and a few teeth that were beginning to develop cavities.

"I'll make her be more careful in the future," Willem responded, pressing his fingertips against his forehead. The doctor's words brought back embarrassing memories. Tiat would often gulp down concerning quantities of milk at once, saying 'I'm going to grow!', then end up almost choking to death. Her attachment to sweet things could also be considered more than abnormal.

"Anyway, the biggest concern, which was encroachment from her previous life, seems to have stopped at a mild level. She's sure to become a fine fairy soldier."

"... encroachment?"

"Yes, that's right. They are all reincarnated beings, or rather the souls of the dead. Before they took on their current figure, they were someone else. Sometimes, memories from that previous life come back and cause negative influences on their personalities or bodies."

The doctor's explanation came faster than Willem could process all the information. "That sounds more like spellcraft than medicine. Do doctors these days study necromancy or something?"

"Any information that helps our patients counts as medicine, right?" the giant responded with a smile. It seemed like that was his attempt at a joke. "Well, at any rate, you don't need to worry about that stuff with Tiat. Right now she's in perfect condition, able to properly exist as herself."

"Then that's good, I guess…"

Something felt off, like the slight feeling of discomfort from a small bone stuck in the throat. But Willem couldn't figure out exactly what it was.

In order to have her body properly conditioned to be a fairy soldier, Tiat needed to be left in the treatment facility for an entire day. Uneasiness at the mention of all sorts of medicine and hypnotism must have shown on his face.

"You don't have to worry. There won't be any damage done to her body. Every fairy soldier goes through this process to acquire compatibility with Dug Weapons," the doctor reassured Willem. After being told that, he figured that any further grumbling would be no use.

"I'll grow spectacularly! Just wait and see!"

He softly patted the head of the pumped up Tiat and whispered in her ear, "I heard you don't actually get any taller during the process."

"T-That's not what I meant! I wasn't actually expecting that! Really!"

And lastly, he was able to send the protesting girl, with a deep red blush on her face, off with a smile.

I'll grow spectacularly! Just wait and see!

But just what, exactly, would they be able to see after her 'growth'?

That, however, was obvious. They would see her go off to the battlefield. Engage in combat as a weapon, be used up, and eventually run out of power. Finish the cycle of 'life' that the girls were born and raised for.

The world was slowly coming to an end. His own story, of course, had ended long ago. And now, he was playing a role in the end of the girls' stories.

"This isn't a very good feeling."

Shaking his head slightly, Willem decided to look for a place to stay the night.

Part 4: A Conclusion

The morning greeted him, all alone, after a dreamless night. His body was in peak condition, but the same could not be said for his mood.

"... I can't seem to calm down." With his back laid against the soft bed, Willem let out a long, groaning sigh. It was probably this bed's fault that he couldn't get his mind off unpleasant things. The mattress was unusually high and fluffy, which caused his back to sink rather deeply, adding to his discomfort. The high ceiling with an intimidating engraving of a Dragon on it didn't help either.

A napping room for commanders, Winged Guard Headquarters, Collinadiluche. Well, 'napping room' wasn't very fitting as it had the necessary size and utilities for a full fledged guest room. Although Willem had not, of course, received any formal training as an officer or performed any great deeds on the battlefield, he had obtained the remarkable title of Second Enchanted Weapons Technician through a special (sketchy) process. After showing his ID, along with Naigrat's letter of introduction, he was directed to this room for the duration of his 'mission'.

Second Weapons Technician… it's a pretty big deal, I guess. He had only just begun to realize this obvious fact. Usually, to become a 'big deal' requires a fitting reason: talent, money, or connections. Without any of those, chances of being promoted to such a rank are slim, if not nonexistent. And this room that he now slept in was made for those exceptional few who fulfilled those conditions.

In the first place, it was still a mystery to him how Grick landed him this position as Second Weapons Technician. Considering that they hadn't run into any trouble this whole time, it seemed unlikely that he accomplished it with a little faking or alteration of a few documents. At any rate, there was no doubt that Willem's current position and authority did not match up at all with his actual worth, which made him feel like he was cheating all these legit soldiers trying to do their job seriously, which only further inhibited his ability to calm down.

"I guess I'll go for a walk or something…"

Tiat wouldn't be done until evening, so he had a good amount of free time. Thinking back, the whole reason he came to this faraway island in the first place was because he had too much free time, which had been causing his mind to linger on undesirable thoughts. So that provided even more reason to stop lazing around in his room. After all, he was in the so called 'stew pot of romance and legends', so the least he could do was take a look around the city.

"I'll probably end up being dragged along everywhere by Tiat before we go home anyway…" After all, she did seem to be really looking forward to their sightseeing walk, so it would be a shame if they ended up wasting time getting lost. On top of that, dragging a despondent Tiat back to the 68th Island would probably be a real pain. Considering all this, it wouldn't hurt him to take a look at all the big attractions beforehand to figure things out.

Breaking out into a soft chuckle at the thought of those sparkling eyes, Willem began to feel a little better already.

He noticed as soon as he stepped out into the hallway near the front entrance: the townscape spreading out beyond the window had begun to turn gray. In other words, it was raining.

"Why does it have to start raining *now*…"

In one corner of the hallway, a large bucket sat underneath a leaky part of the roof, collecting drops of the rain which had so kindly decided to fall. While the building looked deceivingly sturdy from the outside, it of course had many years of history behind it and was beginning to break down a bit here and there. A couple Borgles wearing army uniforms had gathered and were discussing the whereabouts of wooden boards and hammers.

"Well, I'm sure the rain adds its own special charm to the old capital… probably." As for an umbrella, there had to be one lying around somewhere in the Winged Guard Headquarters, and if not, he could always just go to a nearby store.

"Ah?!?"

Lost in his thoughts while staring up at the sky, Willem's reaction came a bit late. He almost collided head on with a girl who had just burst into the foyer. And in the lag before his brain could process the situation, the reactions carved into his system over the years sprung into action. Interpreting the girl's movements as an enemy advance, his body had slid out from in front of her eyes and into a blind spot with a minimal amount of motion. He set his aim on the neck of the girl, who looked like she was about to collapse, raised his hand, and brought it down--

Right before making contact, his mind finally gained control and suppressed the violent tendencies of his reflexes. "Oops." Sheathing his hand sword, he curled his arm around the girl's back, propping her up but also causing her to emit a small yelp.

"Umm…"

"That's dangerous! Don't I always tell you to look forward when you run… or not." Out of habit, his mouth had entered scolding mode. Realizing that the person in front of him wasn't a little fairy, Willem cut off his words and let out a laugh. He helped her stand up and backed away a few steps.

The young lady was of the Lucantrobos race. She bore a tall nose on her wolf-like face and had a thin coating of soft white fur over her skin, except at both ears, which were covered by fur the color of lightly burnt straw. Judging by her finely tailored silk dress, she must have been from a well off family. Why in the world was a little princess like this sprinting into an army facility in the middle of the rain? She didn't look like a soldier, but she obviously must have had some connection since the guards let her past the gate.

"Thank you…?"

With a face that said she still had no idea what the heck just happened, the girl politely bowed her head. The elegant gesture made her seem even more out of place.

"Running without looking ahead is dangerous, you know? Especially in an army facility, you don't know where dangerous things could be lying around."

"Ah, I'm very sorry."

Nodding at the once again bowing girl, Willem said a quick “well then, I’m off” and promptly walked away. He didn’t want any sort of trouble, especially anything that involved women or children. You can’t even run away. Giving up after being asked for help by a woman or a child is just… you don’t do it. That thinking was probably -- no, most definitely -- the master’s fault. The worthless teachings of that damn old man had become part of his flesh and blood.

So if he ever sniffed out the beginnings of trouble, running away before anyone asked him for help seemed to be the best option. People would always tell him that was a twisted way of thinking or that his kindness was lacking, but he had long since been aware of those things. Anyone who can’t properly control their heart must seem twisted or lacking to others, so he wasn’t in the wrong. Running away was a fine choice.

“Um, excuse me!”

In the end, though, he couldn’t run away. With his back still facing the girl, he turned around only with his head. “What? If it’s because I touched you I’m not apologizing for that.”

“No, the responsibility for that matter lies with me, so I will sheath my blade with regards to that.”

“I see… good to see you pick up on things fast… wait, blade?”

Ignoring Willem’s question, the young lady went on. “I have something I would like to ask of First Officer Limeskin. May I request an audience?”

“Lime… huh?”

He had heard the name before: the giant Reptrace man with milky white scales, the very one who led the fairies off to the battlefield, and Second Enchanted Weapons Technician William Kumesh’s direct superior, according to the documents. But, now…

“If you’re talking about that oversized lizard, he’s in the middle of a battle far, far away.” More specifically, he had taken Kutori and the others off to the 15th Island, where apparently a Teimerre had landed and needed to be dealt with. And still, there had been no word about the results of that battle. No wait, what he said wasn’t entirely correct. In general, floating islands which are close together in number are also close together in physical distance. Since they were on the 11th Island, the 15th couldn’t be more than about a two hour shaky airship journey away. So his ‘far, far away’ may have been a bit of an exaggeration -- but there was no need to correct such a small detail.

“And when will he return?”

“No idea. In fact, I want to know that myself…” He really, truly did. “Something about some restrictive barrier blocking all communications. Any news can only come after the battle’s over, apparently. It sure does keep the suspense high…”

“I see…” The Lucantrobos’ shoulders sagged, and her ears drooped. Her expression couldn’t have been easier to read.

“Well, if you have some business you can try grabbing one of the other soldiers over there,” he said, indicating a Borgle who just happened to be passing by.

Suddenly, he heard a commotion. Everything and everyone throughout the entire building seemed to break out in hurried movements all at once. Soldiers came running in from somewhere, grabbed other soldiers and talked in hushed voices, then ran off again, all in the

blink of an eye. Just by watching, Willem could easily infer that there had been some kind of change in the situation. And his intuition told him that this change was not a good one.

"W-What is it?" The young beast lady shrunk back in confusion.

Paying no attention to her, Willem spotted an Orc trying to run by and grabbed him by the neck. "What happened?" he inquired plain and simple.

"T-That's classified information. This information is not permitted to be spread except through set contact routes."

"I commend you for carrying out your work so faithfully, but…" He stole a glance at the orc's badge -- as he thought, an ordinary soldier. Willem pointed out the rank insignia sewn onto his own army uniform. "Second Enchanted Weapons Technician Willem Kumesh. The responsibility of managing Dug Weapons and Lep -- the soldiers that wield them lies with me. Naturally, I also have the authority to hear any information concerning a battle in which they are involved." That was all a lie. Willem actually had no idea how much authority came with his position. He didn't have much interest in the answer either, so he had never bothered to look into it. Pushing through with this bluff was worth a try, though. "I'll ask once again: what happened?" Willem put a stronger tone in his words and drew his face closer.

The orc, seemingly intimidated by Willem's guise, shivered and gave in. "There has been contact from the 1st Fleet. About the results of the battle on the 15th Floating Island."

Willem's breathing immediately came to a halt. Contact from the 1st Fleet. Results of the battle on the 15th Island. What he had wanted to know for so long. Who was winning, when would it end, were the girls still safe -- everything that had been kept hidden until now under that restrictive barrier. He never got the chance to find out even one piece of information. Never got the chance to test his determination. Until now.

In the end, how did the girls turn out?

"We, in the battle with the Teimerre, --"

There was no need to listen until the end: the orc's expression told it all.

Willem laughed. His heart was already becoming a jumbled, sloppy mess. He didn't know how to face that result, the result which he had supposedly prepared himself for, the conclusion that he had been so determined to accept. All he could do was curl the ends of his lips into a frail, helpless smile, and listen to those words.

"-- were defeated."

Willem's field of view turned pitch black. All strength left his knees, and he crumpled to the ground.

"A-Are you okay!?" The young Lucantrobos lady ran over, but he couldn't even gather the will to lift his head, much less grasp the hand she held out to him.

Are you stupid? Somewhere in his mind, another Willem was disgusted at him. It shouldn't have been something to be surprised about. Nothing to act so shocked about. After all, their chances of winning were just a little above five percent -- he had uttered those words himself. With a probability like that, of course he should have understood that the girls would most likely lose.

"Ha ha ha…" His mouth still twisted into the shape of a smile, Willem found that a laugh escaped his throat surprisingly easily. But nothing else besides that laugh came out.

“... I think we should send some kind of contact soon.”

“True that. I bet a certain someone’s heart is about to explode from waiting too long.”

“But…”

“Circumstances are circumstances. I will allow the use of a communication crystal.”

“See? Even the First Officer agrees.”

“But… if you use a communication crystal, they can see your appearance from the other side, right?”

“Well yeah, that’s what they’re for. Problem?”

“B-But I’m all covered in dirt, and these clothes aren’t cute, and my hair’s all messed up!”

“Who cares? You’re fine just like that. Besides, you two are a little past that point in your relationship, aren’t ya?”

“But… you know…”

“You haven’t seen each other for a long time?”

“Yeah, that. I feel like I need to prepare myself…”

“... Huh…?”

A familiar voice. It drew closer, along with a few pairs of footsteps. He raised his head and looked in that direction.

“Hmm… seeing a young maiden in love up close is… how to put it… kind of a pain.” A girl with light brown hair shook her head from side to side, going on about something.

“No, it’s not that! This is… just like… the minimum expected manners.” A girl with sky blue hair refuted, her irritation clearly showing in her voice.

“Hmm… it’s like where did that Kutori who made up her mind so strongly just yesterday go, or like it’s a little late to be worrying about those things. I guess it’s true that when a usually serious girl falls in love she can get out of control, huh?”

“Mm.” A girl with darkish gray hair gave a small nod of agreement.

“You’re both siding against me!?” Sky blue hair let out a cry of anguish.

The three of them all looked exhausted: messy hair, faces covered in dirt and dust, plain hemp clothing. Not exactly flattering appearances. And one more thing: as far as Willem could tell, they, all three, were alive. Without any noticeable wounds. Moving. Talking.

“Ah--” Aiseia noticed first.

“Hm--” Nephren cocked her head.

“Eh--” Kutori turned around to look, then froze.

“You guyssss!!!!”

His pitch black field of vision was dyed pure white this time. He still couldn’t see anything, but his body understood where to go and what he should do. There was no need to bend his knees. No need to gather strength. Doing those would only be an unnecessary waste of time. Running like that, pushing one’s body forward with the strength of the legs, like how the bodies of animals were originally made to do, always led to a slower start. Willem simply contorted his entire body and crashed ahead, as if sliding across the ground.

Long ago, in the age when the Emnetwyte fought against those who held more power than themselves, there was a demand for the ability to sprint at superhuman speeds. Born in the far reaches of the north, refined in the battlefields of the west, then finally crystallized, the

technique bore the official name of Demolishing Nightingale Dash. Even among the Adventurers and Quasi Braves, only a small handful could use it proficiently. But once mastered, it could be used to deceive even the keen eyes of the elves.

In short, a man who had just been kneeling on the ground limp suddenly dashed forward at a speed undetectable to the eye without any preparation or warm up. And then…

“W-W-Whaat!? Ehhh!??”

In the next instant, he was embracing Kutori, who had just been quite some distance away, with all his strength.

“W-Wait! Ow! It hurts! I can’t breath! This is embarrassing! I’m covered in dirt and scratches and I haven’t taken a bath and everyone’s looking -- are you listening!?” Kutori herself probably didn’t really understand what she was saying, and, of course, the screams of protest went in one of Willem’s ears and straight out the other.

“... Where did this guy pop out from?” Aiseia looked up at the giant Reptrace man standing beside her, First Officer Limeskin, and asked, but he simply shrugged his shoulders in place of answering.

“I told you we should have sent some contact earlier…” Nephren muttered.

“Well yeah, but did you really expect him to be this broken?”

“Broken?”

“You know, he’s more of the type that likes to play it cool or act more stern or isn’t honest with himself… so the mismatch in their personalities is kinda cute and all…” Aiseia twirled her finger around in the air. “So you know, he would lightly pat her head and just say ‘good job’ or something, and then Kutori would be like ‘don’t you have more to say!?’ or something. I was expecting that kind of reunion.”

“Willem’s always been like this.” Looking at the flustered Kutori from the side, Nephren explained in an unconcerned tone. “Hard working, direct, not really seeing what’s going on around him. He wouldn’t stop moving until he finally broke, and if he did stop he wouldn’t be able to move again until he was fixed. You can’t take your eyes off him.”

“Ahh… I sort of get it, but then again I sort of don’t…” Aiseia shook her head. “What do you think about all this, Kutori?”

“Stop having a pleasant little chat and help me! That’s what I think about this!!” Her complaint almost sounded like a scream.

“But, I think you should let him hug you until he’s satisfied.”

“No! Before that, either my spine will break, I’ll suffocate, or I’ll die from the embarrassment!”

“If you can talk that much, I don’t think we need to worry about suffocating, hm?”

Nephren let out a small sigh and tugged lightly on Willem’s sleeves. Then, standing on her tiptoes, she drew her mouth close to his ear and whispered, “It’s okay. We’re all here. We won’t disappear anymore.” It seemed to work. Slowly but surely, reason began to return to Willem’s eyes.

“... Ren.”

“Mm.” In response to her name being called out, Nephren nodded slightly.

“Aiseia.”

“Yo,” she responded with a wave.

“And then…” Willem looked down into his arms. “Kutori.”

“Whatever just hurry up and let go of me… this is really getting embarrassing!”

After looking around and grasping the situation, he mumbled “my bad”, then loosened his arms. Kutori, who had silently slipped out of his embrace and backed up a few steps, stared at Willem with a bright red face.

“A real mess, huh?” Aiseia laughed teasingly,

“Mm,” Nephren gave a resigned nod,

And Willem’s sobs rang out loud and clear.

Chapter 3: Everyone, in the Name of Justice

Part 1: The Proper Use of Love and Justice

The ceiling of the strategy room seemed excessively high. The desk plopped right in the middle of the room also seemed excessively large, and the backs of the surrounding chairs, which probably had to be custom made, also seemed excessively tall. This was probably the result of having to fit the various body sizes of the different races that gathered in the room.

And presently, the probable owner of the largest of those various body sizes, an absurdly humongous Reptrace, sat in his very own sturdy looking chair, exploding in cackling laughter. Even so, his expression looked no different than normal, so it really was rather creepy.

“The omen came to Tiat, huh? Pretty fast, don’t ya think?” Aiseia remarked, sitting on top of a chair with her legs dangling well above the ground. The three had already bathed off all the dust and dirt and changed into informal women’s uniforms. Just by having on clothes different from their normal everyday attire, for some reason they appeared somewhat more mature. “I thought it would be about two more years before those little ones held a sword.”

“Not very happy about it?” Willem asked, his cheeks still slightly red.

“Hmm, well being able to go off to the battlefield while you’re young isn’t all good. Of course there’s the danger of flat out dying, and even if things go well you could get some kind of trauma. To be honest, it’s complicated.”

“But we still have to wish her the best. You know, right? She worked so hard until now because she always had the goal of becoming a fully grown soldier in her mind,” interjected Kutori.

“Well, yeah, I get that… but complicated is complicated, ya know?” Aiseia frowned.

“Anyways, Tiat’s the reason I’m here. More importantly, tell me what happened. I heard that the battle on the 15th Island was lost, yet you guys are all here safe and sound.”

Suddenly, Limeskin stopped his cackling and stared straight at Willem with eyes that looked like polished stones. “Wounded warriors, I shall answer that question.”

“A-Ah…” Not expecting a response from that direction, Willem was thrown off a bit.

“First, I praise you. Your tempered blades shone upon the battlefield. You were able to break the fangs of the beast. The victory song should have been shared among us all. However, there was a trap beyond the guidance of the divination. The fangs overlapped with other fangs, and to spare us from foolishly challenging those unknown fangs, I chose to drop the land.”

… Um?

“Sorry, I have no idea what you’re saying.”

To start off, due to a different palate structure, the Reptrace spoke with a distinct pronunciation hard to understand to other races. Adding on top of that Limeskin’s roundabout way of talking, the difficulty level of having a conversation spiked significantly.

“I see.” Limeskin sagged his shoulders, disappointed. Such a gesture might normally have elicited some sympathy, but on a giant lizard towering above you, not so much.

“Hm, well to sum things up, it looked like we would be able to win against the Teimerre that was detected by the alarm system.” Aiseia began to take the explanation into her own hands. She threw a glance Kutori’s way, then continued, “This kid over here somehow conjured up a ton of power from who knows where, so during the beginning the battle was really going smoothly. Like, seriously. At one point I thought we could just leave everything to her and have the rest of us fall back.”

“The ancient holy sword Seniolis can strike down even the Visitors. If the right person uses it in the right way, there’s no way they could lose to anything less, right?” Willem looked at Kutori, but she faced away, refusing to answer.

“Looks like she’s in a sulking mood,” laughed Aiseia.

Willem cleared his throat, then steered the conversation back. “... Anyways, it looked like you were going to win, but you didn’t. What happened?”

“There was one other who slipped in undetected by the alarms. First of all, the Teimerre needs to be killed dozens of times before actually being destroyed. On top of that, each time it ‘dies’ it sheds a layer of its shell and becomes stronger. And this one was especially troublesome. After two hundred deaths it was still lively as ever, and even with Kutori pushing her limits it became a struggle from the middle stage onward. So at that point, things were already getting pretty rough… and then on the 217th death… out of the shell, *two* came out.”

“Huh?” A cry of disbelief unwillingly escaped his lips.

“One of them was the same old Teimerre as expected. But the other, was a different *something*. The alarm system can detect any incoming Teimerre, but of course we wouldn’t expect it to be able to also notice another attacker riding on one of them. It probably didn’t have the ability to grow rapidly like the Teimerre, so it took a while to appear on the surface.

Firearms didn't seem to affect it at all, so we could guess it was one of the '17 Beasts', but other than that, we were clueless. Nevermind whether or not we could win if we fought, we didn't even know what we could do to even start a fight with that thing. And so, we dropped the thing to the ground along with the entire floating island and retreated."

Ah, I see. None of the '17 Beasts' have wings. That's why they can only attack by hoping to float onto an island with the wind, something which of course has a very low probability of occurring. So if you can somehow send the monster back to the ground, you've at least dealt with the immediate threat.

"... seriously?"

"Yep."

Life in the present world, in which the ground has been lost, can only exist up on the floating islands. So, in other words, the floating islands are essentially all that's left of the world. And losing one of them meant that this small world just got even smaller.

"If we pushed Kutori even further, or made her go berserk, maybe we could have defeated it -- a lot of the lizard soldiers shared that opinion. But anything we could try in an unpredicted battle would end up being a bet, and throwing away our strongest firepower for a bet with poor odds wasn't a good idea -- that's what Mr. White Lizard over here decided."

Mr. White Lizard, or rather Limeskin, nodded in confirmation. "..." For some reason, he glanced just once at Kutori before adding, "And for those reasons, we were defeated." He spoke with a voice that was hard to read any emotion from -- well, that's pretty much his normal voice. "What about it? Nothing for you to be concerned about. What is it in the sky will eventually fall. Besides, fate has not all been spent. You coming here is one proof of that. I will become busy from now on. May I leave the duty of bringing those soldiers home to you?" As he asked, his eyes were pointed towards the three fairies.

"I don't mind, but…"

Willem was curious about his 'becoming busy from now on'. A fallen floating island can probably never be brought back up. The significance of this loss, and the responsibility that comes with it, both must be huge, meaning that Limeskin, as the general at that battle, probably had a lot on his plate. But, perhaps it would be best not to inquire further here if he didn't mention any details himself.

Well, there he had it: all the details of the long and treacherous battle.

"Good job, you three." While thinking pitifully of himself for not being able to do anything else, Willem said a few words of gratitude. Aiseia giggled, Nephren tilted her head, and… one girl remained facing away, not showing any signs of looking toward the rest of them.

"Bad mood, huh?" Aiseia shrugged.

"Kutori?" Nephren peered in close to her face and asked, but received only a faint mutter of refusal in return.

Upon exiting the strategy room, they found someone waiting for them: a young beast lady, her sharp pointed ears drooping in uneasiness.

"Hm? You're the one from earlier…" Willem tried to call out to the girl, but her focus seemed to be on someone behind him.

"Uncle!" she cried cheerfully.

Willem slowly turned around, and there he was: the giant Reptrace. “Uncle?” he confirmed.

“Hm.” A solemn nod came in return.

“You’re a beast person? Your fur looks pretty scaly then…”

“No.”

“Then this girl is actually a Reptrace? Her scales look pretty furry then…”

“No. She is the daughter of an old friend. We’ve been close since she was little.” A simple, plot twist free explanation, which Willem probably could have guessed anyway. “-- What is it, Firu? I thought I told you not to come here,” the lizard said in a slightly strong, blaming tone.

“I have come prepared to receive a scolding. But besides you, Uncle, I have no one I can depend on.” The girl answered in a calm voice.

Limeskin raised an eyebrow, or rather he probably would have if he had one.

“Did something happen?”

“A letter arrived. It said if the ceremony is not cancelled, they will assassinate Father.”

Willem frowned upon hearing those not so gentle words.

“-- Hm.”

“Father told me to not worry about it. He said their threats were only talk, that the more we take them seriously the more we feed their ego. But I don’t think so. They are not such lenient thieves. However, with Father insisting like that, I have no one left to turn to but you, Uncle.”

“Hardship is more important than all, hm?” The Reptrace gazed up at the ceiling. “Firu. I am sorry, but I must go.”

“Uncle…” A cloud of gloom fell over the beast lady’s face. A short silence followed.

“Willem. I have a request.”

“I refuse,” he answered instantly.

“... I haven’t said anything yet.”

“I can imagine what it is. Sorry, but I already have enough child care work on my plate.” Willem could hear a little *hmph* coming from Kutori, apparently annoyed at being treated like a child, behind him. But, he decided it would be best to pretend that he hadn’t heard it for now. “I decided long ago not to get near any issues involving women or children.” This time he heard some remarks of disbelief coming from Aiseia, probably alluding to the fact that he has gotten very close to one particular issue involving both women and children, but again he decided to feign ignorance.

“Well that is unavoidable... Then, Kutori. Are there any hindrances in your body’s condition?”

“Eh?” Kutori let out a confused yelp at her name suddenly being called. “Ah, yes. My body is recovering. But, it would still be difficult to wield a weapon.”

“I don’t mind. Well then, I will leave this matter in your hands.”

Kutori blinked once in surprise. “Ah… um… uh…” After a few seconds of showing bewilderment to almost an exaggerated extent, she collected herself enough to close her eyes and take a deep breath. Then, opening her eyes again, she managed to start speaking. “B-But I’m a fairy, you know? I know nothing about this city, I’ve never acted as an escort before, and it’s right after a long battle so I can’t conjure Venom--”

“But there does not seem to be anyone else to rely on. Deal with it somehow.”

“Well… but…” Kutori shot a glance at Willem.

Limeskin’s goal was obvious: there was no need to get Willem to agree directly. If he pushed the responsibility onto one of the fairy soldiers, it follows that Willem would take the burden in her stead. That’s what Limeskin predicted. And, much to Willem’s chagrin, it was a rather accurate prediction.

“... That’s a dirty trick. What happened to your warrior’s pride?”

“A soldier must also stay faithful to victory.”

Quite a flexible portrait of the soldier, Willem thought. “I believe I’ve hardly ever talked to you. Did I do something to offend you?”

“You made me have interest in you, that is all.”

“Um, if possible, I would prefer if no one except Uncle--” The young beast lady tried to quietly slip in an objection, but Limeskin held up his palm and silenced her.

“There is no need to worry. I do not yet know if I can trust or rely on this man, but I can certainly expect something.”

“That doesn’t count as a compliment…”

“And I had no intention of giving one.” Limeskin nodded, then started walking. “I leave the rest to you, Kutori. Follow the guidance of the wind with those who walk beside you and fulfill your duty.”

“Ah…”

The remaining five of them stood there, half dumbstruck, and watched that enormous back as it strode away.

Follow with those who walk beside you, that lizard bastard had said. *Don’t tell me where to walk*, Willem thought, but couldn’t express his indignation in words. If he had reacted like that, it would mean recognizing that he had those intentions from the beginning. Although he was probably way past the stage at which he should care about recognizing it or not, given that he had just exposed that disgraceful, messy side of himself, there was still some line that he couldn’t bring himself to cross.

“Um…” a timid voice broke the silence, only to be soon cut off by Willem.

“Sorry but I have something to attend to. We’ll talk while walking.”

The post-rain old capital had a whole different appearance about it than the previous day. The brick roads and leftover rain puddles glittered brightly, reflecting the afternoon sun’s rays. Sculptures placed at various points all over town, engulfed in faint light and vague shadows, carried a somewhat divine air surrounding them.

Aiseia let out a huge, entirely unladylike yawn. The clear, chilly air filled her lungs, washing away the bits of drowsiness lingering in the corners of her head. “Nice town, huh?” she said while stretching. “Is it even okay for us to be doing this? Walking around the town like normal people and all… our movements outside the 68th Island are supposed to be restricted.”

“Right now you guys are on duty. You even received orders directly from the noble 1st Officer himself…”

“Nah, that’s just Kutori. Besides, strictly speaking, we’re weapons, so even if we can be given orders on the battlefield, we can’t officially accept a mission, right?”

“-- Then you guys are under my command. That oversized lizard had to leave due to unavoidable circumstances, so he delegates all command authority to the Second Technician… something like that.”

“Hmm… a rather scheming plot.”

“I know right? Can’t believe he calls himself a warrior.”

“No, I meant the Second Technician making this story up.”

“That’s upsetting. How could you say such a thing to such a pretty, pure hearted young man?”

“Shameless…” Aiseia laughed.

Willem also let out a chuckle, half in desperation. Suddenly, a gentle warmth enveloped his left arm. Turning around, he saw an expressionless Nephren wrapping her arms around his.

“Hey, Ren.”

“Mm.”

“Can I ask why you’re suddenly holding on to me?”

“... It’s easier to relax when you’re warm, isn’t it?” she replied with a face that said, ‘why bother to ask such an obvious thing?’ “Right now you need the warmth of a person’s skin. My body temperature is a little higher than average, so I’m just right for the job.” She spoke with a courteous and kind voice, like that used when scolding a misbehaved child.

“Well, I’m thankful for your concern, but…” The concern was indeed welcomed, but the action taken out of that concern, not so much. Nephren’s body still didn’t have any ups and downs, so at least there was no awkwardness stemming from that kind of thing. Willem, being a young man, was thankful for that.

He scratched his cheek with one of his free fingers. “I’m fine now, so let go. I don’t think I can handle the attention from onlookers much longer.” He could hear beast people giggling as they passed by. To them, the pair of markless most likely looked like close family or something.

“...” Nephren stared straight into Willem’s eyes, then decided, “You’re acting tough. Can’t let go yet.”

“I think this situation right now is going to make me cry,” Willem said with a sigh. Seriously. “Hey, Kutori. You say something too.” Turning his head around, he spotted Kutori shuffling along with her head faced down. At his call, she looked up and slightly opened her mouth. She seemed to be searching for words, but came up empty. Suddenly her face turned red, and she turned away with a hmph.

“The heart of a maiden is a complicated thing,” remarked Aiseia.

Willem started to comment on the maiden’s heart as well, but gulped down the words at the last second. There was no telling what kind of teasing could follow, and, besides, getting the apparently very worried Nephren to let go of his arm was much more important.

Their surprise reunion, and his revealing of that disgraceful and ugly side of himself at the same time, had knocked a good chunk of stuff out of order. So he had yet to say ‘welcome home’ to them, and he had also yet to hear them say ‘I’m back’. Of course, it was too late now for that kind of conversation. It’s not like he had wanted to act out such an emotionally charged reunion. But he also couldn’t say that he would only have been satisfied if he welcomed them

home all cool and calm. He should have been satisfied just being able to confirm that they returned home safely, and, of course, he had no objections with the outcome.

So, well… making a couple of embarrassing or uncomfortable memories wasn't such a bad tradeoff. He well understood that, but still…

"Does it really look like I'm trying that hard to act tough?" he asked quietly, and Nephren gave a small nod in return.

"You two really are alike," Aiseia poked fun with a laugh.

For some reason, looking at that smile, Willem felt that her expression today felt strangely artificial.

The young beast lady, who identified herself as Firacolulivia Dorio, shared her story along the way.

"Hm? Dorio… could you be…?"

"Yes. My father is the current mayor of Collinadiluche," she responded casually to Aiseia's question.

Either because of the discipline learned from her parents, or because she had just naturally been born that way, the young lady's emotional fluctuations were hard to discern. Having been rejected by the 'uncle' she had been counting on, and on top of that being forced to work with an odd group of total strangers, she couldn't possibly be totally at ease. However, so far no signs of distress or irritation had surfaced on her face or in her voice.

"Ah, I see."

According to her, the mayor was a merchant who worked his way up to the top over the years, and he had Firu (a nickname requested by the young lady herself on account of her real one being too long) when he was already quite old. The city had originally been ruled by an aristocracy; the role of mayor had only just been introduced about ten years prior. As a result, the number of people unsatisfied with the current political system, a good portion of which are the old aristocrats, is more than just a few. To them, a mere merchant playing around as mayor was an unforgivable enemy.

"Hmm." Willem half listened to the explanation, only bothering to put in the occasional nod to make it seem like he was paying attention.

"So what was the letter you mentioned earlier?" Kutori moved the conversation along. Despite having been randomly given full responsibility for a random job, she seemed to be taking it pretty seriously.

"... It was a threat from a faction trying to overthrow my father and put one of the old aristocrats in as mayor. They believe that my father's presence is a disgrace to the tradition and history of the city, and they will use any method to eliminate him."

"Hmm." Willem felt like he heard this story before -- oh yeah, he just heard it yesterday from the doctor. Judging by those gunshots, unfitting of the quiet town, the scope of the aforementioned 'any method' was quite wide.

"At the end of next week, the reconstruction of the Central Church will finish, and a ceremony to commemorate it will be held. There, my father plans to speak about the future that this city should strive for. A future in which doors are open for all races and this city acts as a trade hub connecting the islands. Most likely, the faction I told you about earlier plans to attack

the ceremony and threaten all of Father's allies using their pawns, The Order of Annihilation Service History."

"That name sounds like it was made up by a buncha teenagers that'll regret their choice in five years or so."

Apparently, Aiseia shared Willem's opinion on this point.

"Of course, a minimal level of security will be present. However, considering the way that the Order does things, I fear it will not be enough. That's why I wanted to receive help from Uncle, or rather First Officer Limeskin, but…"

"What do you think?" Willem turned towards his left arm and asked.

"No good," Nephren answered immediately. "The Winged Guard as an organization exists to defend against invaders from outside Regul Aire. It cannot interfere with the political matters of individual cities. There have been cases when an individual or group very clearly disrupted public order and nearby Winged Guard soldiers went to suppress them, but those should be treated as rare exceptions. Even if we know some trouble is going to occur beforehand, that still does not give grounds for dispatching soldiers while nothing has actually happened yet. That would be seen as an interference with political matters."

"Well, there you have it. The mayor probably knew all that, which is why he didn't ask that giant lizard for reinforcements himself."

"But… justice is obviously on our side. Why must restrictions be placed on those trying to eliminate evil harmful to our world?"

"Because justice isn't a good reason to pick up a weapon." Willem interjected sharply. "In fact, it's the opposite. The word justice is flung around to justify the use of weapons. The real reason someone wants to beat up their opponent is always different. Always. They want to steal. They want to look down on others. They want to feel superior. They don't like the look of something. They want to erase something. They want to relieve stress. Or maybe a combination of those." Waving his hands about, he went on, as if reciting an ancient poem.

"But they don't want to admit it. They want to feel good, not guilty, while beating up their opponents with full strength. In those kinds of times, in order to deceive themselves or their allies, they hoist the flag named justice. Everyone and their mother starts doing that without even realizing it, then a bunch of guys who believe in their so-called justice start beating each other up, and that's how you get a war. That's how it's been since long ago."

"That's…" Firu opened her mouth, then fell silent.

-- *What is it?* thought Willem. The value of justice is decided by the persuasive power it gives you to get others involved and the strength of your willingness to depend on it. If one truly believes from the bottom of their heart in their justice, then it has plenty of meaning. However, no matter how meaningful it may be, that justice alone will never be enough to get the Winged Guard moving. That being said, if the justice that Firu believed in was fragile enough to be shattered by some lazy remarks from a guy she just met today, it would have been a little disappointing.

"Well, at any rate, if the ceremony's next week then we can't come no matter what kind of problems need resolving. We have our own things to deal with. Right now we have to pick up a little kid from the doctor and get on an airship home by evening."

"... I see." Firu cast her eyes down.

“Wait a second wait a second, Mr. Technician. I have two questions.” Aiseia pulled on Willem’s right sleeve.

“What.”

“What you just said… isn’t there a slight contradiction, you know, you having fought as one of the Braves, the noble defenders of the Emnetwyte? The representatives of justice, right?”

“There’s no justice or any of that crap in a struggle for survival. If we let our guard down we would have been wiped out -- all we were doing was desperately trying to prevent that. Wanting to live on is just an instinct, and if you start to view instinct and justice as the same thing then there’s no such thing as crime anymore.”

“... Hmm. Well, putting the logic aside, I think I understand how you feel about this.” Aiseia nodded.

Nephren’s grip, still holding fast to Willem’s left arm, tightened slightly.

“Another question. We heard her story, but you’re still pretty cold to that Firacolulivia girl. I seem to remember you saying that you couldn’t leave a cute girl in distress alone, or something else creepy like that while trying to sound cool.”

“Don’t call it creepy.” Willem was aware, but it still hurt.

“It must be about age, right? If she’s older than me then she doesn’t count as a girl anymore… or something like that?”

“How biased do you think my tastes are…” He had been suspected of such things in the past, but it wasn’t true. Definitely not true. “No, it’s not that… it’s just…”

“Just?”

Just… what, exactly? Something that refused to be put into words clinged onto the inside of his throat.

“-- No matter who I’m dealing with, I don’t want to agree with anything except things that I can’t agree with.”

“Huh?”

Willem himself didn’t really know what he just said. As expected, Aiseia raised one eyebrow and made a questioning face.

“...” For some reason, Nephren nodded.

“Now, putting that aside, we have a little time before we need to be at the treatment facility.”

Figuring out how to deal with just a little free time is always difficult. They didn’t have enough time to plan out a sightseeing route, but, on the other hand, just walking around aimlessly seemed like a waste.

-- Just then, a delicious smell tickled the tip of his nose. Spinning his head around to locate the source, Willem spotted a cart by the side of the road, which appeared to be selling fried mutton and diced potatoes wrapped in large vegetable leaves. The stimulating aroma of the spices forcibly aroused his appetite. His stomach rumbled loudly.

“Say…” Willem turned around to the girls. “Want to get some? I still haven’t eaten breakfast.”

“Ah, good idea. We’ve just been eating soldier rations up until yesterday, so something flavorful would be greatly welcomed,” Aiseia responded absentmindedly.

Nephren didn't say anything, so she probably wasn't against it. And right as Kutori was about to speak,

"-- Wait right there, please." A weak, but sharp, voice sounded.

For a moment, Willem actually had no idea who the voice belonged to. Feeling chills creep up his spine, he slowly turned around. Standing there was the figure of an expected, yet unexpected, person: Firacolulivia Dorio. Even after having her in his field of view for a while, his instincts continued to doubt whether it was really her or not. Her presence seemed completely different from before. He couldn't believe he was looking at the same person.

"The spices are obviously overdone, and they don't have their operating license stuck to the front of their cart. No question about it, that store sells the crudest meat allowed by the law."

"O-Oh?"

Somewhere along the way, her voice had regained its strength. Slightly overwhelmed, Willem shrunk back a bit.

"On top of that, their prices are higher than normal. Any local would instantly recognize that something is off, but tourists are easily fooled into buying and eating their inferior meat. If those kind of businesses continue, the entire city will earn a bad reputation. No matter how much Father tries to drive them away, those kinds of people always pop up." An unsteady light burned in her eyes. Her body shook faintly like a ghost's. "This way," she said, then started walking off.

"H-Hey?"

"If you eat there, the crude taste will taint your memories of Collinadiluche's cuisine. I cannot allow that; it would be an embarrassment to Uncle. Please follow me. I will show you genuine Collinadiluche style lamb." With large strides, Firu set off into an alley.

"... That surprised me," Nephren murmured in an entirely unsurprised sounding voice. "Well there she goes. What we should do?"

"It looks like we don't have much of a choice."

"That's what I'm thinking too… Kutori?"

Upon having her name called, Kutori, who had been staring absentmindedly at her feet, abruptly faced upward, as if flicked on the forehead.

"Ah… w-what?"

"You okay? You've been quiet as a stone statue for a while." 'That's pretty quiet', he heard Aisea remark. "If you're still tired say so, okay? No need to push yourself so hard when you're not on the battlefield."

"No, it's not that…" She shook her head. "Sorry for making you worry."

Her anger seemed to have calmed down, but something was still off.

"If leftover Venom is still lingering in your body, I can fix it for you like before, you know?"

"Fix--" Kutori gave Willem a blank look for a second, then suddenly turned bright red. "-- No, no! If you do that now, my back will probably break!" she said, feverishly waving her hands back and forth.

"Whatcha guys talkin' about? The 'fix'."

"No! Don't ask!"

"Well… with a reaction like that it's impossible not to. What is it… could it be you actually really want to talk about it so you're trying in a roundabout way to get us to ask?"

“No! I mean what I mean! It’s really nothing. Nothing, okay!?”

“You’re digging yourself into a deeper and deeper hole with every word. Maybe you’ll break through the bottom of the island if ya keep going.”

“No!!” And right as Kutori raised her voice in protest,

“-- Excuse me.” A soft voice, cold as ice, interrupted.

Willem turned around. On the border between the main road and an alley, there stood the figure of a young beast lady, her face as terrifying as a demon’s.

“I believe I told you to follow me.”

“Verysorrywewillgowithyouimmediately!” The four of them practically leaped into the alleyway and followed after Firu.

They were led to a butcher’s shop, packed snugly in the corner of a small plaza.

“It’s not a cart or something?”

“Of course there are many good food carts, but if you’re looking for cheap and delicious lamb at this time, around this neighborhood, there is only one real answer. Any local, even a five year old child, knows this.”

“Damn, five year olds around here must be pretty smart.” Willem paid the Ballman store owner, who silently handed over a wrap of mutton noticeably larger than the one they saw at that cart. Then, he took a bite. “It’s good.”

“Right?” Firu looked proud of herself.

“Keeping the sharp spices to a moderate amount and mixing in sour herbs… I see. With this seasoning, you can eat this huge amount with no problem.”

“Right? Right?” Nodding feverently, Firu turned to the Ballman butcher and gave him a thumbs up. The Ballman, still staying silent, returned the gesture.

… Hm? A feeling of uneasiness suddenly crept up on the back of his neck. The faint presence of malice and ill will lingered about the air. At first, he thought it might be the something something knight order again, but it was a different feeling than what he got yesterday when he first arrived. That time, it was unclear who the malice was directed towards, but this time--

“-- Hey, Firacolulivia.”

“I said to call me Firu.”

“That’s right. Hey, Firu. Do you like this town?”

Her large eyes blinked once in confusion. “What do you mean, all of a sudden?”

“Just answer. Do you?”

A brief silence.

“Yes. I think this is the best city, with no equal.”

“Is that because it has four hundred years of history? Because it’s the largest city? Because its economy is prosperous? Because its food is good?”

“You ask some annoying questions.”

“I get that a lot.” Chuckling, he took another bite out of his lamb wrap.

“... All of those things you just listed are unmistakably essential pieces of this city’s charm. But, I do not think any one of them particularly stands out to me.”

“I see.”

The vegetables used to wrap the meat also had some tricks put into them. Upon each bite, the flavor changed slightly. While venturing on that journey of taste with his tongue, somewhere along the way all the food in his hands had disappeared. He had just downed a sizable amount, but he immediately longed for the next bite. So this was true Collinadiluche style lamb. Willem could see why Firu recommended it so much, even going so far as to change her entire personality for a moment.

"... I do not know of any city besides here." She continued her answer, carefully and slowly choosing her words. "This is my precious hometown, and the entirety of the world that I know. So I love this city as much as I love this world."

"Whoa there, getting a little sentimental."

"You're the one who asked!" Firu exclaimed in protest, her cheeks flushing red (although it's hard to tell from above her fur). "You really are annoying. Is it fun getting me to divulge my innermost feelings?"

"I won't deny it," Willem said, licking a leftover drop of grease off his finger. "I've tasted some of this town's delicious cuisine. I've met someone who loves this town. Compared to a little while ago when we were talking about what justice is or whatever, I think I'm a little more in the mood to do something to help this town out."

"And what do you mean by that?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. Well, let's put that aside for now. If you're free after this, will you do me a favor?"

"... What is it?"

Watching Firu eyeing him suspiciously, trying but failing to guess his intentions, Willem smiled and said, "Give us a little tour of the place."

"I-It wasn't scary and it didn't hurt at all!" Those were the first words that flew out of Tiat's mouth. "The shots were like nothing to me!" Her face looked like it was about to burst into tears, but…

"I see, I see." Willem patted her head lightly, which she responded to with a small sniffle.

"She's very perseverant and straightforward. She'll make a good soldier." With a gentle smile on his stern face, the Kikuroppe doctor gave his seal of approval. Putting aside the first part, whether or not the latter was something to be happy about was questionable. "You girls in the back… I've treated you all before. Glad to see you're still doing well."

"It's been a while. Thanks to you, we've been able to keep fighting," Kutori alone answered politely and bowed. Aiseia laughed vaguely, and Nephren failed to show any response.

The doctor must have detected something unnatural in their reactions. "Could it be…"

"Ah, I'm afraid I'm gonna have to ask you to not say anything further than that, doc." Aiseia quickly cut off the Kikuroppe's words.

"What? You guys are hiding something aren't you?" Willem asked suspiciously.

"It's not good to stick your head into girls' affairs like that, Mr. Technician. Keeping a suitable distance between each other is the first step to happiness, you know?"

“Is that so?” Giving up on trying to extract any information from Aiseia, who was obviously trying to cover up something, Willem turned to the doctor. However, all he did was scratch his cheek with a face that said ‘don’t look at me’.

“All I can ask of you is… let’s see… take good care of these children.”

“Well, in the first place, I’m a manager at the fairy warehouse, so taking care of them is part of my job. Or at least, that’s how I see it. So whether you ask me or not, I intend to do that anyway.”

“I see.” The doctor nodded calmly.

Willem noticed that, for some reason, Aiseia was glaring at the Kikuroppe with a hint of hatred in her eyes.

To return home to the 68th Island from Collinadiluche required transferring between countless airships. And those airships happened to be quite infrequent. Of course, the distance also wasn’t nearly short enough that the fairies could just use their wings to fly home. So, essentially, they were stuck in Collinadiluche until the evening, when the next airship they needed was scheduled to depart.

“And that’s why we’re going to use this time to go sightseeing!” Willem proudly declared in front of the five of them: the fairies, who had changed into regular clothes, and Firu.

“Huh?” Kutori muttered.

“Eh?” Aiseia had a ‘what the heck is this guy saying’ face.

“Ooh.” Nephren had an unusually joyful expression.

“...” Firu remained silent.

“Yayy!!” Tiat clapped her hands furiously.

“You guys can’t move freely outside home, so this kind of opportunity is rare, right? On top of that, you just got back from fighting, so a little relaxation can’t hurt.”

“Wait, wait. What about the Dug Weapons?” Aiseia gave the bundle of cloth she carried on her back -- which contained a large enchanted sword -- a little rustle. “Not quite in the mood to walk around with this heavy thing.”

“We can keep them at the treatment facility and just get them on the way back.”

“They’re super expensive, super important and precious secret weapons, but…”

“That’s why we can leave them with people who understand how much they’re worth. They’re not something a petty thief would be looking for. Don’t worry.”

“Well, that’s true…”

“I would be happy if I could see a lot of places, but…” Nephren peered into Firu’s face. “Is that okay with you, Firu?” They had just refused to help Firu a little while ago. There was no way she could be very happy about being asked to be their tour guide. “I don’t see any reason you have to follow us anymore.”

Firu sighed. “You people have been exposed to a dark side of this city. If you left now, you may go with the false impression that this is a town full of violence and scheming. Part of the fault lies with me, who carelessly asked an unreasonably favor of you.” As she talked, strength flowed into her voice. The fist she held by her chest tightened, and the flame in her eyes burned brighter.

“Ah, Firu? Hello? Firu?” Aiseia seemed a bit confused at Firu’s sudden change in mood.

“I will not accept that. There is no other way than for me to show you the charm of this town myself. To that end, for the rest of today I will do my best to guide you through this wonderful city.”

Aiseia turned towards Willem

“... What?”

“What did you do to her? Did ya put something into her food earlier?” Aiseia asked suspiciously.

“Hey, don’t speak badly of other people like that. All I did was give her some advice and ask a favor.”

“Ah, so you tricked her.”

Willem sighed. Needless to say, Collinadiluche was a large city. Going around to every famous sightseeing attraction would take more than a day, just taking into account travel times. If you wanted to add art galleries or other museums to your itinerary, it would stretch out to at least a few days. With only half a day, it was necessary to carefully choose places to visit and what transportation to use. And for both of those, a person very knowledgeable about the town would be needed.

So, all Willem did was ask Firu, who fit that criteria, to show them around a little. All of that was true. As for the other stuff, well, he could put that off until later.

Part 2: The Improper Use of Love and Justice

They saw something called the Grave of the Perjurer. Supposedly, it was the grave of a legendary swindler who lived around two hundred years ago. For some reason, people who had once been tricked by him put together funds to place a tombstone by his grave which read ‘Here lies an honest man’.

Just about everyone was puzzled as to why they would do such a thing, which led to a wide variety of theories. In fact, there were so many theories that they created a small boom in Collinadiluche’s fiction market and nearly made up a genre of their own.

“Personally, I like the theory that he uttered words of true love right before his moment of death.”

“Hmm, I like the one where he was really working all along to expose the immorality and corruption of the aristocrats. That one’s sorta cool, don’t ya think?”

“The one where he angered an earth god and was cursed so that all his lies turn to truth was interesting.”

Wow. There really was quite a variety of theories. In the end, though, it was a piece of the past whose truth no one knew. Often, the story which is the most amusing or the most convenient for one party comes to become known as truth, regardless of its validity.

Everyone believes in the theory they want to believe in. If no conflicts arise, then there’s nothing wrong with that. The world will keep on spinning.

They saw something called the Lovers’ Staircase. This one was pretty self explanatory. The stage of a love story between a noble daughter running from a fate of arranged marriage

and a lowly boy sustaining himself through thievery. They supposedly met when they bumped into each other on this very staircase and tumbled down.

At the top and bottom of the staircase were huge signs which effectively ruined the scenery. On them were the symbol of the city council and the warning message ‘No Rolling’.

“No rolling!?”

Townspeople passing by giggled at Tiat, who let out a scream of despair as if the world was coming to an end. They probably heard similar remarks fairly often at this place. Willem pretended that he didn’t see Kutori sag her shoulders in disappointment.

“Hold on one sec, Mr. Technician.” Aiseia pulled on his sleeve. “You seem to be going about business as normal, but don’t ya think you could at least say some nice words or something to Kutori?” She looked over at the sulking blue haired girl, who refused to face their direction. “Well, right now she’s like that, but up until yesterday she was working really hard, ya know?”

“I know, I know. Dealing with girls in a bad mood has been a weak point of mine for a long time though.”

“I figured, but you’re the only one who can fix that bad mood.”

Willem ruffled Aiseia’s hair a bit. Surprised, she jumped up and let out a little yelp. “W-What are you doing all of a sudden?”

“Was just thinking you’re a good kid, caring for your friend first even though you also worked hard and must be tired yourself.”

“Who cares about me?! Right now we’re talking about Kutori!” Aiseia blushed faintly and knocked away his hand, an unusual reaction for her. He knew that she must not be used to receiving compliments or praise, but still she was always over the top like this.

-- Again, an uneasy feeling crept up on the back of Willem’s neck. Their pursuers were starting to keep a little more distance between them than before, but seemed to be growing in number.

“I guess it’s about time we round them up, huh…”

“Eh? Whatcha talking about?”

Returning his hand to Aiseia’s fluffy head (and causing another yelp), Willem called out to Firu, who was leading the way ahead of them. “Hey, can I make a request for the next place? If there’s a sort of hidden spot where not many tourists go, I’d like to go there.”

“Is that a challenge to my guiding skills? Very well, I accept,” she responded with a fearless smile, her usual delicate princess look nowhere to be found.

“This is the Well of Wishes.” Firu pointed at a small clearing where six roads all intersected. In the middle sat a plain old ordinary well. “Now, it isn’t as famous as the Central Church or the Barley Plaza, but it has been used a few times in movies or stories, so I imagine anyone into those things will recognize it.”

Tiat nodded her head vigorously.

“Is it one of those things where you throw a coin in and your wish comes true? Those always pop in romances and fairy tales,” Aiseia asked as she peered into the well.

“Unfortunately, not everyone’s wishes come true. There is actually a spirit who resides in the well that can make wishes come true, but the ratio is said to be about one in every thousand or ten thousand people that throw a coin in.”

“Ah, when you mention the numbers it really loses its fairy tale magic.”

“However, you can throw as many coins in as you like. The more you put in, the higher your chances are, so some people come with bags of 20 Bradal coins.”

“... now all the romantic feeling is gone too.”

“There was a period of time when the well’s use was prohibited. That was around fifty years ago, during the ban on gambling. It was deemed to be too addictive for gamblers.”

“Alright, that’s enough. This is just getting more and more depressing…”

While Aiseia and Firu engaged in conversation, Tiat took out a small coin and threw it into the well. According to her, she didn’t particularly have a wish she wanted to come true; she just wanted to reenact those scenes in the movies she’d seen. Aiseia, who apparently didn’t listen to that, gave her cute, romance chasing Tiat a crushing hug. Off to the side, Nephren quietly copied her, taking out a coin and throwing it in with a splash.

They seemed to be short one person. Turning his head around, Willem soon found her. Kutori Nota Seniolis stood by herself a little ways away from the well.

“You don’t want to try too?” He walked over and took a seat on one of the wooden crates piled up beside her.

“No, I’m fine. Not really in the mood to make a wish,” she replied softly, still refusing to look at him.

“Really? That’s surprising… I thought you’d like this kind of thing.”

“Well, I don’t exactly hate it… I guess if I had to say I actually really like it, but…” she mumbled almost inaudibly. “I’m just not in the mood. It’s probably something that people do to reconfirm their determination when their goal is still out of reach. It hurts their wallet a bit, but that helps them remember how valuable their determination is. So people who’ve lost their goal or come within reach of it by themselves don’t get much out of it.” Her tone carried hints of loneliness and gentleness.

“Hey, are you really okay? You seem a bit off today.”

“Yes, I told you, I’m fine. Us girls just have days like this sometimes for no reason.”

Ah, that seemed like something normal Kutori would say. It gave Willem a little bit of comfort. And that comfort pushed him to say words that he might have originally kept to himself.

“... thank you.”

“Eh.” She seemed genuinely surprised.

“For the longest time, all I thought about was death. All I wanted to do was go meet those people that waited for my return home. But when I met you guys, I was able to change. I wanted a place to belong to again. In a way, you saved me. Because I met you, I had someone I could wait for too. And now that you’ve come back, well… I’m a little happier.”

“Eh.” She seemed genuinely creeped out.

“Hey don’t back away so quickly. Also don’t make that ‘what is this embarrassing creature’ face. I didn’t even say anything that weird…”

“Everything about it was weird, especially how you can say such embarrassing things with a straight face.”

“What do you want me to do? Say it with a big smile on my face?”

“No that’s not the problem… anyways.” Kutori smiled. That gentle, cheerful, yet fleeting expression made Willem’s heart skip a beat. “You put it in the most embarrassing way possible, but I’m glad you feel that way. Being able to make someone happy lets me think that life is worth living after all. Like I thought, I didn’t make a mistake when I chose who to fall in love with.”

-- Woah there. Flustered, Willem turned his gaze away from Kutori’s face. This is bad. What is this girl. What is that smile. *She’s still a kid*, he reminded himself. He couldn’t sincerely accept her words of ‘love’. Doing that would only bring her unhappiness later on. Kutori’s words and expression held such unusual charm that Willem had to keep repeating those orders to himself in order to stay calm.

In that moment, Willem realized: she was confronting him head on with her true, honest feelings. That’s why her words had the power to move his heart. He could no longer brush it away as the silly first crush of a child or a temporary obsession.

“What’s with that reaction,” Kutori giggled softly.

Nothing, he started to say, then managed to swallow that lie before it left his mouth. “I’m embarrassed okay? Something wrong with that?”

“Haha no no, in fact it’s very good.” She laughed, louder this time.

For some reason, despite the broad smile, even now her face seemed like it was about to burst into tears. This is bad. Now we’re really moving into uncomfortable territory. Kutori, who was supposed to be a child in Willem’s mind, was beginning to be more and more like a woman. And of course, Willem had never been very good at dealing with women. He had absolutely no idea how to decipher the meaning behind each word and action. Even against relatively easy to read people like Naigrat he had trouble, so he had no chance against Kutori, who was obviously hiding something underneath that smile of hers.

Still, he couldn’t just stay silent. As Willem collected himself and began to make a proper response, a man’s voice cut him off.

“Sorry for interrupting your sightseeing tour, princesses.”

“Do you know him?” Tiat asked Firu.

“No, I do not recall seeing him before,” she responded, shaking her head.

“Yes, of course. This is our first meeting.” The man was a beast person with cat like features. He wore a suit (which didn’t look very good on him) and was accompanied by five other youngsters behind him. They were all beast people with not very high quality clothes, and each one had a brown handkerchief wrapped around his wrist.

“We’re surrounded,” Nephren murmured.

Firu looked around them in a panic. Groups of two or three beast people, all with the same handkerchief, had appeared in each of the roads leading to the little clearing where they stood. The six of them and the newcomers were the only ones in sight. It was as if the little section of town where they stood had been completely cut off and isolated from the rest of the city.

“No…”

“Don’t worry, we would prefer to not get rough. Princess Firacolulivia, if you wish to see your filthy markless companions leave here safely, I suggest you accept our invitation.”

The cat man seemed to be trying to talk in a dramatic and pompous voice, but he was utterly failing. In the end, he just sounded like an unnatural clown.

“Who are you people?” Firu tried to speak boldly, but her uneasiness clearly showed in her shaking voice.

“Haha, I am not so important that my identity must be kept secret, but since you asked, I’ll keep you in suspen--”

“The Order of Annihilation Service History, right?” All eyes turned to focus on Willem. With all the attention on him, he bent down to pick up a few pebbles and began playing with them, throwing them up in the air and catching them. As he continued to juggle, he looked over and called out to Firu.

“Ah, yes, what is it?”

“You probably haven’t been outside by yourself much recently, am I right?”

“Eh? Y-Yes. My father ordered me to do so.”

“But today you needed to talk to that giant white lizard, so you left the house in secret, right?”

“Yes… but why do you--”

“To put it simply, this ‘knight order’ has been after you to use you in negotiations with the mayor. Well, more accurately, they’re going to sell you as someone that can be used in negotiations with the mayor to their sponsor.” A wave of commotion rippled through the beast people surrounding them. “You were just lucky that you didn’t get caught while you were on your way from home to the army headquarters, and these guys were lucky that they found you walking around with us.”

Tiat looked utterly confused, Nephren was expressionless as usual, Aiseia seemed to be following along like it was a detective novel or something, and Kutori sighed with a face that said ‘here he goes again’.

“Ever since we ate, I could feel us being watched. I could sense that they were quickly gathering reinforcements, so I requested you to take us to an unpopulated place. And just as I predicted, these guys showed up.”

“W-Wait a second. I do not understand. When you say it like that, it almost seems like you used--”

“That’s right. I used you as bait. Wanted to talk to these guys for a bit.”

At a loss for words, Firu stood still in shock.

“And what might you want to talk to us about?” the suit wearing leader interjected suspiciously. “I do not believe we have any business with you, friend.”

“Aiseia.”

“Hmm?”

“The fine knights of this order don’t have the ability to see spell veins. Why don’t you show them a little of that Venom you’ve ignited?”

“Are you giving me permission to go all out?”

“No. Just give them a peek, nothing more.”

“Got it, Mr. Devil Technician.”

For a split second, a burst of light filled the area. Looking up, Willem saw a pair of radiant yellow wings spread out on the back of Aiseia, who stood there with her eyes closed. To be

precise, they were merely illusions of wings, existing only as pure light, not tangible objects. But because they were merely illusions, even without kicking up a wind she could easily break free from the ground.

"Ah…" Firu, who probably hadn't heard anything about Aiseia other than that she was somehow involved with the military, let out a sigh of surprise and admiration.

"... a Venom user, I see. Magic techniques to sprout wings are quite rare. So you want to show me that you could escape anytime, even when surrounded like this?"

From the brief tremor in the suit wearing beast man's eyes, Willem guessed that they had prepared some sort of method to deal with the possibility of them escaping by air, most likely a gunpowder weapon. However, such a small and portable weapon would necessarily have weaker accuracy and range, meaning it would be hard for them to actually stop the fairies. Moreover, they couldn't risk hurting Firu with a stray shot.

"Good to see you catch on quick." Willem inferred that they wouldn't attempt anything risky, and it seemed like his guess was right.

"If what you said was true, then you planned for all this to happen. It's obvious that you would be prepared. But what do you want to talk about?"

"Well, nothing too important." He paused for a second, then asked, "Do you guys like this town?"

A breeze blew by, scattering scraps of paper lying on the brick roads every which way. The howl of a beast sounded from somewhere far away.

Tiat, unable to comprehend the situation, gave up thinking about it and looked around. Nephren was holding her hand over her mouth and smiling slightly, quite an unusual sight. Aiseia, somewhat astounded, shook her head back and forth as she continued to float in the air. Kutori still refused to face them and muttered 'maybe I did make a mistake when I chose who to fall in love with'. Well, maybe that was for the best. Firu's originally wide eyes had become even wider, and meanwhile all the beast people fell silent, unable to respond.

"... what do you mean, all of a sudden?" asked the suit wearing leader.

"Just answer."

A short pause.

"Of course we do."

"Is that because it has four hundred years of history? Because it's the largest city? Because its economy is prosperous? Because its food is good?"

"Such foolish questions you ask. What other answers could there be than yes to all of them? Collinadilluche is the jewel of the sky. Polished over its long years, with every virtue a city could have, it is the capital we live in with pride, so--"

"-- Is that what your sponsor thinks?" Willem's interjection completely silenced the man.

"How much do you know?"

"Actually I've pretty much just been guessing, but thanks to you I know a lot now." Willem sighed. "In the first place, you guys' actions are a mess. Threatening to assassinate the mayor at the ceremony was a stupid move. If your main goal was to negotiate, then there are better methods than assassination. If your main goal was to actually assassinate him, then of course

you wouldn't warn him beforehand. Even if your goal was to threaten the opposition by first warning then killing the mayor, you didn't need to specify the place and time. Then why was the threat sent? Probably to satisfy the childlike desires of the aristocracy to show off and hog attention."

Well, that was already obvious from a name like 'The Order of Annihilation Service History'. Willem paused for a moment, but no one spoke. They were all waiting for him to continue.

"Judging by how you were able to gather this many people in the short time since you spotted us, your preparations and communications must be pretty good. Also, going after the mayor's daughter was a practical move. It's not hard to notice that she's a bit naive and not as cautious as she should be.

The person who thought of the kidnapping must be different from the one who sent the threat. The opposite order would have obviously been more effective. The fact that the threat came before the kidnapping attempt means that doing them in the reverse order wasn't possible for some reason. Most likely, the guys who were ordered to carry out an absurd assassination panicked and planned the kidnapping almost all on their own at the last minute.

Well, that's what it looked like to me, and I guess I was right for the most part." Willem finally stopped talking and nodded to himself a few times.

"... what do you want?" The suit wearing leader changed his tone of voice.

"Hm?"

"If you wanted to crush us, there was no reason to say all that first. Now that you've revealed your cards, I assume you want to negotiate?"

"Glad you catch on fast." Willem stood up from the wooden crate he had been sitting on. "I'll get right to the point. Tell us your sponsor. It seems to me that you guys don't particularly care about the mayor. You're just mercenaries, following your sponsor's orders. And you're starting to get fed up at their unreasonable requests. I bet there are guys among you ready to quit already."

A few of the beast people were visibly perturbed by Willem's words. One of them slid his hand in a pocket and pulled out a gun. At lightning fast speed, he turned and locked his aim on Willem, but soon let out a scream and dropped the weapon. The pebble that had struck his hand fell to the ground and rolled around next to the gun.

"By the way, whether or not you all leave here unharmed depends on your own actions," Willem said, still in a throwing stance. All he did was lightly toss a pebble, no magic involved. However, he had the element of surprise, which made it almost seem like a magic trick to anyone that wasn't prepared. "Well, what'll it be?"

After that, things got resolved rather quickly. The beast people gave in and revealed the name of the former aristocrat sponsoring them. They also said they had proof of some of his orders, so Willem told them to bring it directly to the mayor.

The crowd gathered in the little intersection was probably not the entirety of the order, but the loss of their leader and at least ten members meant that they wouldn't be able to cause any big trouble for the time being. In particular, there was no more worry of an assassination attempt at the upcoming ceremony. They had successfully carried out Limeskin's orders, but…

A loud slap landed on Willem's cheek.

"I hate you," a teary eyed Firu said. "I understand that what you did was for my sake, but I cannot forgive you for choosing that way of doing it."

Well, I saw this coming, Willem thought. The princess was honest, diligent, and pure. Most likely, she unconsciously expected those qualities out of the people around her. The term 'foul play' had no place anywhere in her head. Needless to say, she would never even think of doing such a thing to anyone, but she would fall into a panic, unable to comprehend what had happened, whenever someone used such actions against her.

"When we first met, you even touched my stomach…"

"Huh?"

"Do not tell me you are not aware! To the Lucantrobos, entrusting one's stomach is equivalent to entrusting everything! It is a part which cannot be exposed so casually, even to family!"

How the heck am I supposed to know that!? What are you guys, actual dogs!? Even if Willem shouted that she probably wouldn't believe him. He chuckled nervously and averted his eyes. So that's why she mentioned something about sheathing her blade or whatever back then. Well, now he knew. He made a mental note to be more careful next time.

"Ah, well… sorry for a lot. I won't ask you to forgive me, but at least accept my apology."

"It is just as uncle said. You cannot be trusted or relied on." Firu's harsh words left Willem without a comeback. "Saying that made me feel a little better, so I will accept your apology. However, do not misunderstand. I still hate you."

"Of course. That's fine with me." Willem nodded, then turned around. "Alright you guys, it's time to head ho--" His voice quickly trailed off, leaving the last part barely audible. Stares colder than ice bore directly onto him.

"Sure, let's go home," Kutori said, her eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"Now I knew you were that kinda person, but that was like a whole new level, ya know?" Aiseia said, a dazzling smile somehow still on her face.

"Let's go quick. Tickets for the airship will stop being sold soon." Nephren's usual indifferent tone felt just a tiny bit cold.

"There's so many more places I wanted to see!" Tiat seemed to be angry at something different from everyone else.

They had their own styles, but the four of them all seemed to be irritated in some way.

"Why did you choose such a dangerous method?" asked Kutori as they headed back to the treatment facility to pick up their weapons.

"Hm?" Kutori's mood must have improved if she was the one talking to him first.

"There must have been at least a few safer ways of doing it right? Rather than leading them out to an unpopulated place. Did you just want to show off?"

"No, it's just I wasn't too confident in myself. I might have turned out looking like a cool detective or whatever, but those were all just guesses based on past experience. I could only be sure of the details once I saw their reactions to my questions, so I needed to make a situation where we could have that talk."

“Past experience… what kind of crazy life did you live to know about that kind of situation?”

“Well, back then was a pretty dangerous time. If you were a Quasi Brave, you’d be caught up in some kind of power struggle somewhere at least once a month. After doing that for a while, I could dodge a knife in my sleep and detect poisoned food just by intuition alone. The poison that the pros used hardly had any taste or smell, so you couldn’t just rely on your senses to pick it out.” Willem laughed cheerfully.

“... was that supposed to be funny?”

“Well it’s because I lived through it all. Of course if I died I wouldn’t be laughing.” Kutori made a sour face. Now that one was supposed to be a joke, but it looks like it flopped horribly. “I admit it wasn’t a very good plan. I figured you guys would notice something abnormal and ignite Venom, and you did, but you guys just came back from a long battle. I shouldn’t have made a plan which involved you guys using Venom. Tiat and Firu were there too. I promise I’m properly reflecting on my--”

Before he could finish, his words were cut off. Kutori had stopped walking. About two paces ahead, Willem also stopped and turned his head around.

“That wasn’t the problem,” she said in cold, blaming tone. “When I said it was a dangerous method, I didn’t mean for us. There wasn’t even any danger to us. You were in a battle stance ever since you sat down on that wooden crate.”

Ah. “What are you talking about? I was in full relax mode.”

“Three seconds.”

… “What?”

“The first one you would take care of was the sheep headed beast man behind you on the right side. Open with a pebble throw, followed by a kick to the chest, then a dash to the two deer headed men nearby. Knock them unconscious, steal their knives, and throw them, disabling the remaining two in that group. That would take just less than a second. To take care of everyone would take a total of three seconds. Am I right?”

She saw through everything. She must have been observing Willem very closely, detecting even the slightest changes in his posture or gaze. Back then, he thought Kutori was just standing there oddly quietly, but she had been watching all that.

“I think you’re reading too much into things. Five people in one second and ten in three? Even I couldn’t do that.”

“Don’t lie. I know your fighting style and strength better than anyone in this world. Have you forgotten? You taught me it yourself.”

“... that’s right. You’re so good I forgot you were my student.”

Well, he only ‘taught’ her for a few days. And nearly half of that time was spent on drilling the correct way to treat the Kaliyon into her. As for techniques, all they really did was practice the basics. He quickly showed her a few of the special named techniques, but didn’t even tell her the names, much less the finer details. Who would have thought she’d improve so much just from that?

“The reason you had to lead them to an isolated place… maybe the reason you gave is half right, but it seems to me like half of it was a lie. I know you could have found a safer way, so--” Kutori gave Willem a sharp glare. “You wanted to fight, didn’t you?”

Ah. Now that she pointed it out, Willem first realized that possibility. Perhaps, subconsciously, he had wanted to fight. Wanted to let his violent tendencies run wild. Wanted to risk further beating up his already broken body. Wanted to take out his frustration from sending the girls off to battle while he sat uselessly safe at home on someone.

"I don't know why, but stop. You don't have to fight anymore. Your battle belongs to us now."

"-- I have nothing to say. You've really been watching me closely."

"Obviously. I'm in love with you."

"Come on, we'll be late!" Up ahead, Tiat waved both hands about in the air.

After waving back, the two quickened their pace.

Part 3: Still Far From Home

"Ahh~! Finally on the way home," Aiseia said cheerfully as they drew closer to the harbor area. "Once I get home, I'm gonna sleep like a real man!"

No one had the energy to comment on Aiseia's sudden gender swap. All lined up side by side, they simply continued to walk in silence. While no one had actually pointed it out, they tacitly understood that every one of them was dead exhausted. For Kutori, Aiseia, and Nephren, who hadn't yet taken a proper rest after coming back from their two week long battle, it was pretty obvious. However, Tiat must have been almost as tired as those three after such a long period of excitement at leaving the island for the first time (and also receiving treatment to become a soldier).

There's a lot to do once we get home. Igniting Venom inevitably places a burden on the blood flowing throughout one's body. Continually using it for a long period of time could cause disruptions or stagnations to occur in the blood, harming the entire body's condition. Muscle exhaustion can be fixed with a little sleep, but the same cannot be said for Venom poisoning. It will heal eventually if you just go about your daily life, but repeatedly overexerting yourself in a short period of time can cause chronic symptoms.

It looks like the stagnation isn't so bad that it's causing a fever, but maybe I should treat all of them anyways just in case. Willem looked down at his palm and lightly cracked his knuckles. He had lost countless things important to him since that time long ago, but luckily he still had some of the skills that he once learned, countermeasures to Venom poisoning being an example. The massage technique might not receive a very warm welcome from the girls, being the age that they are, but they probably wouldn't refuse if he told them that the poisoning could shorten their life spans -- or if you wanted to put it that way, their durability as weapons.

"I wanted to look around just a little longer…" Tiat turned around to gaze at the city once last time, a look of reluctance in her eyes.

"I'm sure you'll get another chance soon enough." Willem gently patted her on the head.

"I told you to stop treating me like a little kid!" Tiat swatted his hand away.

"Willem Kumesh, Second Enchanted Weapons Technician."

As Willem chuckled and pulled his hand back, a cold voice called his name. Turning around, he spotted an unfamiliar man standing there. He had a thin body and wore sunglasses over unusually Emnetwyte-like facial features. However, his white hair and long, narrow ears of

the same color clearly distinguished him as a Haresantrobos. A race of beast people resembling rabbits, they are extremely few in number, unlike the Lucantrobos. Willem knew of their existence before, but this was the first time he had seen one in person.

"... who are you?"

Willem took a closer look at the man's clothes. On the shoulder of his army uniform, an insignia identified his rank as a First Officer. The shield and scythe design revealed the branch of the military he belonged to as the Military Police.

"As you can see, I am a First Officer in the Military Police." As the Haresantrobos spoke, a high pitched voice cried 'please hurry!'. The airship was already beginning preparations to take off. If they missed this one, they would have to wait until the next day. "I have heard about you from First Officer Limeskin's report."

"I see. I don't know what he wrote about me, but I don't believe I have done anything worthy of attention from the Military Police." Well, at least nothing that the big lizard would know about, Willem added on in his head.

"Correct. It is true that 'may be into little girls' was written in the report, but that by itself is no threat. Crime only comes from actions, not thoughts or preferences."

Willem made a mental note to do a Demolishing Nightingale Dash into a full strength kick next time he met that lizard.

"Even if there is some favoritism going on between the manager and his subjects, as long as there is no hindrance to their effectiveness on the battlefield, it is not our business to interfere."

Willem made a mental note to punch the rabbit in the face when he got the chance.

"It's false. If he were into little girls I wouldn't be having so much trouble," Kutori muttered off to the side loud enough for Willem to hear.

Ah... well, anyways. "So what do you want then? If it's going to take awhile, come back another day. We're in a bit of a hurry, if you haven't noticed."

"There is someone you need to meet. You will come with me."

"No." Willem refused sharply. "Don't make me repeat myself. We're in a hurry. If you've read the report or whatever, you should know, right? I'm in charge of these guys, and it's my responsibility to bring them home to the warehouse. I can't have you interfere, even if you are a First Officer."

"I cannot let you refuse. My responsibility is serious as well."

"I see. Then why don't we part ways here and each carry out our own duties?" As he responded, Willem tried to simply walk past the man.

"The Great Sage, Suwon Candel." Upon hearing the Haresantrobos say that name, Willem froze. "According to the First Officer's report, you can perform maintenance on the Dug Weapons. On top of that, you currently work as the Second Enchanted Weapons Technician. What was lost has risen again. In this world, having lost the great land below, where everyone lives clinging onto these tiny rocks, the significance of those two facts is large indeed. Accordingly, I cannot simply let you go. We must consult the wise Great Sage regarding that skill of yours. If you insist on refusing, I'm afraid I will have to take you by force."

The man raised his hand, and, along with many pairs of footsteps, soldiers suddenly appeared around them. Each of them carried a long, curved sword on their backs, which were probably not just for ceremonial use.

“Woah there, looks like things are about to get heated…”

“Stop, Aiseia. Don’t conjure Venom. This is different from earlier. If we cause a ruckus, it’ll only harm us. Also, these guys are ready for us.”

“... got it.” With a sigh, Aiseia suppressed her magic. “But what do you plan on doing? Wait any longer and we won’t be able to go home, ya know?”

“I know, I know.” As Willem answered, he pondered over that name in his mind. The Great Sage, Suwon Candel. He knew that name. It was a name that he would never forget. “I guess I really do need to meet this guy.”

“Willem?” Nephren peered into his eyes with a worried face. She rarely made such easy to read expressions, which meant Willem must have looked especially perturbed.

“First Officer.”

“Yes?”

“If I go with you, can you guarantee that these guys get to the 68th Island safely?”

The fairies, all four of them, were visibly upset at hearing Willem’s question.

“I swear on this insignia that I will get them home.” The Haresantrobos nodded.

“Wait.” Someone tugged on Willem’s sleeve. “What do you mean you’re going with him? When are you coming back?”

“Well… I can’t really say much, other than that it depends on what business they have with me.” He shrugged his shoulders.

“Don’t go.” A hint of anger began to show in Kutori’s eyes.

“Like I said, I need to meet this guy…”

“If you go I’ll get mad.”

“Don’t act so selfish.”

“Shut up. You’ve always treated me like a little kid, so at least listen to this one selfish request. Or are you only going to treat me like an adult when it’s convenient for you?”

Her words stung. Willem was used to handling kids, but he had never been good with girls that were too old to fit into that category. He never knew what they were thinking. Which of their words to believe. What to say to cheer them up. And most of all, what to do to make them stop crying.

“Don’t cry.” He reached out and wiped Kutori’s eyes with his finger, only to have his hand violently slapped away.

“You’re the worst, only deciding to act nice to me now.”

I know, Willem thought. *I think that about myself too*. But he didn’t know what else to do. It was the same back then, the same now, and would surely be the same forever more.

“I’m sorry,” he said, then pulled his arm back. Kutori’s hand fell away from his sleeve, clawed at the empty air, then, unable to find anything to grasp, curled up into a fist.

“... idiot,” she muttered.

He couldn’t face her any longer. “Airships get cold at night, so wrap yourself in a blanket and sleep early, okay? If your body gets cold the Venom poisoning will only get worse.”

“Ah… alright, got it,” Aiseia replied.

"..." Nephren failed to return a response as usual.

"Um, uh, okay." Tiat, who was busy looking nervously at Willem and Kutori, seemed to barely register his words.

"Well, see you," he said, then gently gave Kutori a push on the back. Even though he didn't put any power into it, Kutori lost balance and stumbled for a few steps before standing upright again.

"Idiot!!" she screamed, then ran off ahead, shaking with anger.

As she reached the door, Kutori shoved her ticket into the official's hand and dashed into the airship. Alerted by her wild behavior, the ticket collector turned around and yelled 'please don't run on the ramp!'.

"What can I say…" Willem could feel that word sink into his body. "Come on, you guys hurry up and go too."

"Well, if you insist." As Aiseia glared at him with a somewhat unsatisfied look on her face, a wagon with a load of jute bags piled onto it flew by.

"Oh, watch out young lady, coming through!" the driver said, a bit too late.

The harbor district, with people and goods constantly coming and going every which way, was no place to be standing around and talking idly.

"Is this really okay with you?" Nephren asked.

"What are you talking about?"

"You still haven't said something important. If you keep playing dumb, I'll get mad too."

To have even Nephren, who never got mad, angry at him would not be very pleasant. He couldn't detect any irritation in her voice. It may have even been more indifferent sounding than usual. But that only showed how serious she was.

"I don't want to make any more promises I can't keep."

"Do you not intend on keeping it?"

"I do, but… there are some things you just can't do."

"You're the one who made Kutori make the promise."

He could say nothing in return. *You better survive and come home*. He had ordered something originally unforgivable: the return of a disposable soldier. Moreover, he did it for a stupid, selfish reason, and even ignored the wishes of the soldier herself.

"You don't get to say whether you can or can't do it."

"Alright alright, I get it." Willem scratched his head roughly and looked away from the fairies. He honestly had no idea what his expression looked like at the moment. Was he smiling? Crying? Angry? Not even able to discern his own emotions, he didn't want to show his face to anyone. "I'll get this over with quickly and go home, okay? So you guys go first."

Somewhere out of his field of view, Nephren probably nodded.

"Roger that." He heard Aiseia answer affirmatively behind his back. "I don't like it, but I guess we have no choice. Come on little one, let's go."

"Ah, okay… but…"

"No buts, we gotta hurry."

"Ah! A-Alright I got it let go of me!"

The three of them ran off, the sound of their small footsteps moving farther and farther away. A steam whistle cried loudly, piercing Willem's ears. The official desperately warned the misbehaved passengers to not run on the ramp.

"We could have prepared a private ship," the Haresantrobos said as he watched.

"They probably just don't want to be in your care."

"Well it looks like I'm hated… oi, some of you go with them. See them safely to the 68th island."

At his orders, three soldiers ran into the airship after the fairies. The ticket collector was starting to lose it.

The ramp was drawn up.

The propellers blared loudly.

The anchor detached.

And finally, the airship departed from the 11th Floating Island, along with the four fairies riding on it, leaving Willem behind.

"You know your face looks really peculiar when you cry."

Willem remembered that he was supposed to punch that rude little rabbit.

Chapter 4: Resurging Past, Vanishing Future

Part 1: Soul Chase

Five days earlier, on the still floating 15th Island.

A piercing cry rang throughout the air. The shell of the Teimerre collapsed onto the ground as the beast met its 178th death. And of course, without even a second's delay, a crack formed on the back of that shell, signaling the hatching of its 179th life. Every time the Teimerre is reborn it changes form; the latest one appeared to be some sort of plant. A writhing mass of green could be seen through the cracks in the dead shell. After a few more minutes, countless vines began to reach out from the inside.

"Blue warrior, fall back! Artillery squad, begin attack! Cover her retreat!"

Limeskin's orders flew across the battlefield. However, the 'blue warrior', or Kutori Nota Seniolis, did not seem to be in a cooperative mood. The Kaliyon in her hands, Seniolis, was fully responding to the Teimerre before her, meaning that the sword, which grows stronger the stronger its foes are, had reached its peak destructive power. Kutori needed to stay on the battlefield as long as possible to make use of that.

"Please let me do just one more!"

"No!" Her commander sharply rejected her request.

For a moment, she hesitated. Should she go against orders and stay? At the moment, she was wielding immense power. She could contribute more than she ever had in any previous battle. For the first time, she was using the Dug Weapon -- no, Kaliyon -- in the proper way, the way that was lost long ago with the Emnetwyte. If she and Seniolis were not there, they had no chance at victory. In that case, if she pushed herself just a little further no one should mind…

Red water.

-- Eh?

Ashen wind. A laughing giant. An injured cocoon.

-- What is this?

Kutori froze, bewildered. Strange and seemingly random images suddenly started popping up in her head. Was it because she had lost focus? Over 120 hours had passed since the battle's start, so that could very well be possible. Moreover, all those hours had been spent on the battlefield, a place so far separated from usual reality. Perhaps she had lost touch with reality and started to daydream.

In any case, she needed to focus. They could not afford to lose this battle. And more importantly, she could not afford to die here. She needed to return to that place. Go home to that person.

Fish swimming through the night. A sand castle piercing the heavens. A rotten aquamarine sun. A sentimental death. A handful of cubes. A red grimoire. A fox head hung on a high tree. A silver stake. Bakers painting the rainbow ocher. A clown in a shipwreck on a stormy night laughing laughing laughing laughing laughing--

"Agh!"

Even if she tried to focus, it didn't stop. It kept going on and on. But what was it? Haphazard images. Incoherent delusions. Persistent daydreams. The shadow of a past she should have no knowledge of. Filth of a soul that should have been wiped away. The murmuring

of someone she sat back to back with. The reality outside a dream. Overwhelming, raging waves crashing forth endlessly.

“Okay, that’s enough.”

A familiar voice mixed in with the jumbled mess inside Kutori’s head.

“Ai… seia?”

“I’m the one who proposed the switch. It’s time for you to back down.”

“But if I stay here just a little--”

“And if the encroachment gets just a little worse, it’ll be too late.”

Encroachment.

She had heard that word before. Where was it? Ah, that’s right. She was told when she became a fully grown fairy soldier. What exactly they were. How fleeting their lives were. What kind of deaths could await them besides dying in battle.

She was told that fairies are the lost souls of dead children unable to leave this world. That they are not, strictly speaking, a form of life. They are simply a natural phenomenon resulting from the delusions of a confused soul. And those souls will one day remember who they once were.

“Could this be…?”

“At your age, ya usually wouldn’t have to worry about it. But apparently statistics aren’t very useful. Maybe the amount of power in Seniolis made it advance all at once.”

“My age…? A-Ah!”

Kutori had been grabbed by the scruff of her neck and was forcibly being dragged off the battlefield. Behind her, the artillery bombardment had started. Muscular Reptrace soldiers donned in full body armor all stood in a line packing shells into their cannons. The thundering booms shook the ground and seemed to almost burst her skull apart. The shells leveled the forests, chipped away at the island itself, and, most importantly, smashed the reviving Teimerre to pieces. Of course, they did not inflict fatal wounds upon it. Stealing the life of a Teimerre requires an enchanted weapon on the level of a Kaliyon, but the artillery was still useful to buy a few minutes of precious time.

Aiseia, spreading her golden wings, flew 1200 malumel away to a rest tent, carrying Kutori in her arms. With a little grunt, Aiseia dropped her luggage on the floor.

“Ow! That hurts!”

“At least you can still feel pain. There’s a mirror over there. Take a look.”

Still lying face down on the ground, Kutori tilted her head up. Beside the crates of food rations stacked up like a mountain range there lay a small hand mirror.

“Look at what?”

“You’ll see what I mean.”

Kutori reached out, grabbed the handle, drew the mirror closer, and peered into it. A pair of scarlet eyes stared back.

“... what is this…”

Kutori Nota Seniolis has blue eyes. She didn’t like them very much at first, but ever since Willem said ‘they’re the color of the ocean’, she’s changed her opinion a bit. Well, she didn’t actually know what the ‘ocean’ or whatever was, so whether or not his words were a compliment she couldn’t be quite sure.

Anyways, no matter how hard she stared or how many times she blinked, the eyes staring back at her in the mirror bore the same red as a flame.

“Initial stage symptoms. If you rest for about two hours it’ll go away. Before that, absolutely no Venom. Also, think about yourself as much as possible. Don’t let a stranger’s memories sweep you away. Cling to your own.”

Loneliness within white darkness. A prayer echoing throughout a cramped place. A room covered with books.

Images of unknown origin continued to rampage through Kutori’s mind. She tried covering her eyes with her hands and shaking her head, but of course such a simple trick had no effect.

“These are memories? The memories of that someone that died when they were still a kid, before I became me?”

“A stranger’s. No relation to you. Nothing in common. A complete stranger’s. If you forget that or start to question it, you’ll be consumed.”

“You said something about age earlier… is this…?”

“Yep. Barely any fairies live too long in the first place, so usually encroachment is something that can be completely ignored. From the few cases that have occurred, though, it seems like it starts to get serious in fairies around twenty years old whose mind and body have fully grown. You right now are a rare case among rare cases. Like I said, it’s probably because you’ve been in prolonged contact with such a high amount of Venom. At this rate, you might not even make it through today, much less until the end of the battle.”

“I wouldn’t want that…” Kutori rolled over onto her back. “If I rest for two hours, it’ll go away, right?”

“The symptoms you’re seeing right now will. But even after that, you won’t be able to go too crazy on the battlefield.”

“... ah, that’s rough.”

Kutori held her arm over her eyes and laughed emptily. Originally, she was meant to die at this battle. To intentionally make her Venom run berserk and burn the enemy to ashes by exploding herself. Because she had a sudden change of heart and didn’t want to accept that fate, she learned the proper way of wielding a Kaliyon from him. She learned how to fight as a Brave.

Despite all that, an unexpected death now loomed right in front of her face.

“It’s okay. Even if the encroachment is showing up a little now, your body is still pretty young. As long as ya don’t go too crazy, it shouldn’t progress much further. There won’t be any harmful impact to your everyday life. I know someone who’s suffered from it before quite well, so I can guarantee you that.”

“... butter cake, I guess.”

“Hm?”

“I’m remembering my promise and the reason I can’t die. Clinging on to your own memories is important, right?”

“That’s true… is food all ya got in your memory?”

“Desires based on our primal instincts are strong, you know? Probably.”

Aiseia laughed. For some reason, Kutori felt like it had been a long, long time since she last saw that face. Logically, though, that couldn't be. Aiseia was always smiling, to the point where Kutori found it hard to picture her face with any other expression on it.

"Well then, I'm off."

"... to where?"

"The front lines, silly. Nephren should be out there working hard right about now, so I gotta support her. We'll buy plenty of time, so rest up."

"Ah… okay, counting on you."

"Won't let ya down," Aiseia responded with a smile and nodded.

A few questions lingered in Kutori's mind: how did Aiseia know so much about encroachment? And how did she notice every little change that happened to Kutori? She never got the chance to ask. Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, there was no need to ask. As Aiseia ignited her Venom, spread her wings and took to the sky, Kutori spotted a hint of scarlet dwelling in her golden eyes.

An adult man and woman quarreling. A big, big puddle. A chicken's foot.

"These are strange memories," Kutori muttered.

A twisted lake. An orange road stretching on forever and ever. Shining silver cloth.

"A soul that died while still an infant becomes a fairy, huh? This kid sure has seen a lot of weird things then… where in the world were they from?"

Or maybe, this was just how children saw the world. After all, Kutori, who didn't exactly have a normal childhood, wouldn't know what it was like. To them, maybe a small lizard running through the forest looks like a fire breathing dragon, or a guide leading them to a different world, or the handle of someone's bag rolling around in the wind. The world spreading out in front of the eyes of a child must seem very strange and illogical to an adult. Perhaps that explained the images passing through her head.

Kutori, still lying face up, stared at the roof of the tent. The tears streaming out of her eyes flowed past her temples and towards her ears. Fairies are the result of lost spirits unable to comprehend death. As far as she knew, no fairy has ever lived long enough to be considered an adult in terms of age. She had always thought it was because of fighting; all the older fairies eventually got wounded or went berserk in a battle with the Beasts.

But maybe she was mistaken. Maybe it was fundamentally impossible for a fairy to become an adult. The lost and confused soul begins to understand death as it grows up. Then, once it does, it must return to the natural state that it failed to reach years ago. If such a thing as fate existed, this was surely it. An end that could not be avoided, no matter how hard one hoped or prayed.

"Aw, I was planning to corner him and finally force him to marry me once I became an adult…"

She once heard from Willem that 'tragedy' was one of the qualities considered necessary in a Brave. One who had a past or fate that would make anyone feel sorry for them was deemed fit to wield greater power than those without. And Seniolis, the oldest and greatest

Kaliyon, especially seemed to prefer those with such a background. Only those who bore a fate of death and destruction could wield the pure, white blade.

"I see… so that's why you're letting me use you." She glared bitterly at the sword lying on the floor next to her.

Because they're essentially made of an already dead spirit, fairies usually treat life very lightly. They do not fear death. In that respect, Kutori was not acting very fairy like at the moment. She had a reason why she couldn't die. A place she needed to return home to.

"Butter cake," she murmured, tightening her hands into fists.

Okay, okay. I'll make you eat so much cake you get heartburn. Got it? You better survive and come home.

Kutori recalled the promise they exchanged that night underneath the starry sky. At that moment, she made up her mind. It didn't matter if she wasn't allowed to live long. It didn't matter if she couldn't become an adult along with him. She could accept that. After all, it was her fault for being born as a fairy, as someone so unlucky she satisfied the tragedy fetish of some stupid sword.

But still, she made up her mind. She wanted to live on in that ephemeral dream for just a little longer. Even if the world were about to end. Up until the very last moment before it all came crashing down, she would be alive.

"Alright! Let's do this!"

Gathering as much motivation as she possibly could, Kutori punched the air with her fist.

After that, the battle went on.

The sun sank, rose, sank again, rose again, repeating the same cycle over and over.

Despair descended upon the battlefield.

It took many forms: a huge, faceless man whose body was a mass of black ivy, the Teimerre reborn from the death of its 216th copy, the shell of the beast which had just met its 217th death, the pupa growing into the 218th form. And lastly, the cradle from which a new *something* emerged.

"Another Teimerre…?" a Reptrace muttered, too dumbfounded to continue his artillery duties.

"No," Nephren, exhausted almost to the point of collapse, answered in between her rapid breaths. "The alarm only detected one Teimerre, and it's always accurate about them. That means it must be something else."

"But our cannons have no effect at all! How could it not be a Teimerre!?"

"Then that means… it's another, unknown 'Beast'?"

"Why the heck is that thing sprouting up here!?" screamed Aiseia, half crying and half laughing.

The battle had already been drawn out for too long; every soldier upon the field suffered from severe fatigue. For days, they had done nothing but kill the Teimerre, each time telling themselves that it would be the last one. But it never was. The Reptrace soldiers were also beginning to run low on ammo for their cannons.

With the end nowhere in sight, motivation had already begun to plunge some time ago. The addition of another enemy dealt the final blow. Everyone's spirits were at last crushed with the unexpected arrival. They all repeated the same thought in their minds, but still didn't dare put it into words.

We can't win.

"-- Retreat," Limeskin ordered in a bitter voice. "Twenty minutes from now, dispel the suppression barrier around this island. At the same time, send a warning to all nearby islands. We have failed to remove the enemy. The 15th Island is now the territory of the 'Beasts'. All life nearby is in danger."

"No no no no, we can't do that! The only reason Regul Aire can continue existing is because the Beasts can't fly, right!? If we let them set up a nest here, it's all over!" Aiseia protested.

"Of course, you are correct. Thus we need to sink this island as swiftly as possible. However, this island is large. The firepower we have will not suffice. We must gather all the power on Regul Aire. It is a race against time."

"... just checking, what happens if we lose that race?"

"Do you truly want to hear?"

"Ah… maybe not. Never mind." Aiseia plugged her ears and shook her head.

"-- It's my fault," mumbled Kutori. Her face was pale as a ghost's. "I could have stopped it by myself if I went berserk. Because of my selfish desire to live, we got into this mess--"

"Wrong," interjected Nephren. She squatted on the ground, so tired that not even the strength to stand remained within her. "That's only taking the Teimerre into account. Even if you went berserk, you would just barely be able to kill it, leaving the second Beast behind. Then we would have to face that unknown enemy without you. That situation would be worse than the one we're in."

"Ah… that's true. Right now's pretty bad, but I guess it's a little better than the absolute worst of the worst, ya know?" Aiseia's expression was more grim than it had ever been so far.

"... is that right?" Kutori still didn't fully believe Nephren's logic.

"Yes," Nephren declared strongly. "This battle was one we couldn't have won from the start. Now we just need to think about how to sink the island."

"That is also true." Limeskin nodded. "To gather all the firepower the Winged Guard owns would take at least ten nights, even if we hurried. But if there is no harm to the other islands in that time, then the buds of our victory song will start to become visible."

"... that doesn't sound very likely. Even if the Beast decides to lay low for ten days, can you guarantee that you'll be able to drop the island with all that firepower?"

"About twenty percent chance."

"Ha ha… ha. Well, at least you're being realistic. Those numbers don't sound very promising."

"Not at all." The Reptrace general cackled.

Ah, so this is how it is, thought Kutori. The world might end. Her mind accepted that statement more easily than expected. That conclusion triggered no feelings of anxiety or denial in her. It was simply as if some sinister being lurking behind her since her birth had finally

walked up and laid its hand on her shoulder. The world was always on the verge of destruction. The end that they had been pushing back for so long was finally about to descend upon them. That's all.

There was no need to lament. In the end, everyone will die anyway. Nothing will remain afterwards. No one will be left to feel loneliness or sadness. If that's the case, going into that final moment with peace in one's heart is surely the best option. Panicking won't make anything better.

Wait, no!

Kutori tightly gripped the brooch hanging by her chest. She hadn't forgotten yet. She had a reason why she needed to live and return home. Until her stomach was full of the butter cake of victory, she couldn't die. Until that oaf accepted her proposal, she needed to live on, even if that meant slurping up mud. Well, it looked like she would have to live quite a bit longer.

And if the world ended, that would be somewhat hard to do. Of course, Willem couldn't die either. She also didn't want to think about the little ones, still unable to fight, being exposed to danger. In that case…

A rocking boat.

-- The encroachment again. If Kutori let her guard down even a little, it came welling back up, aiming to take her life. Utterly annoying. Maybe she was the weaker one, being such an unstable existence as a fairy, but she didn't care. She was alive. Alive and struggling to grasp happiness. She wouldn't let that be taken away by some random kid that died ages ago.

As she made up her mind, a thought floated into her head: the plan wasn't very good. If she calmed down a bit and thought things through, she would probably come up with a few better options. But there was no time, which meant any plan she managed to think of was by default the best plan. All she needed to carry it out was a little determination.

Resignation and determination are essentially the same thing. They both refer to a decision to sacrifice something important in order to achieve a goal.

That's right. With pride and confidence, she would give up. She would throw something important away in order to get a glimpse of that happiness. Right now, that's what she needed to do.

Slowly, she took a deep breath. Then, slowly, she exhaled.

"Kutori?" Nephren called. Kutori's behavior must have seemed strange to her.

"First Officer, I have a plan. Please start the retreat now." Ignoring Nephren for the moment, Kutori spoke to Limeskin as she glared at the writhing Beast. "Ren, Aiseia. I need you to help me out a little. Since you guys can fly it shouldn't be a problem if you leave after everyone else."

"Whatcha planning on?"

"I think I'm going to split this island in two," Kutori said and gave the sword in her right hand a little flourish.

The numerous fissures in the body of Seniolis began to widen. Faint light signaling the stimulation of Venom poured out from the gaps. The Kaliyons were made to help the weak resist the overwhelmingly strong. To accomplish that, they utilize the power of whoever they touch. The stronger the opponent, the stronger the Kaliyon becomes. And right now in front of their eyes was an extraordinarily powerful enemy threatening to destroy all of Regul Aire.

“Well, let’s do this.”

Only seconds remained before the 218th Teimerre finished being born.

Kutori kicked off the ground. The Venom ignited in her body enhanced her concentration and slowed down the flow of time. Inside her now colorless world, she smashed through the walls of air blocking her way and closed the distance between her and her opponent almost instantly.

A mass of ivy vines stretched out to counterattack. Kutori carefully observed all 87 of them. There were a lot, but most of them were bluffs meant to intimidate her and posed no real threat. About 65 of them would just hit the ground without her even trying to dodge. The problem was the other 22. Eight of them were aimed at her legs, trying to immobilize her, five were aimed at her arms and sword, trying to disarm her, and the other nine were aimed at her head and chest, trying to steal her life. Looking at them one by one, she could tell that their trajectories weren’t very precise, but the sheer number of vines rendered it impossible to dodge all of them. Usually, it would be best to just avoid any fatal wounds and only think about how to press on with the attack. However, that wasn’t enough for her right now.

First, she cut down the vines aiming for her feet. Upon contact, Seniolis responded with the magic flowing inside them. The faint light emitting from the fissures in the sword grew slightly brighter. Kutori’s thoughts and senses sped up even faster, buying her a mere fraction of a second. But that was all she needed. Swinging Seniolis once more, she chopped down the five aiming for her arms.

A frog with seven eyes.

The encroachment was also accelerating. Kutori didn’t have time to deal with it, so she tried her best to push it out of her mind. The five vines just cut down excited Seniolis even further.

A lion swallowing a snake. A pile of coins.

Now it was just rinse and repeat. All she needed to do was get Seniolis in contact with anything and everything around her. The power it acquired on each slice bought enough time for the next step.

A mountain rising from the sky. A rural town in the rain. Candy inside a small bowl.

The distance decreased to zero. Kutori brought down Seniolis from directly above onto the entangled mass of ivy right in front of her eyes. The sword sent a few vines flying, pierced through the main lump, then kept going straight into the ground of the 15th Floating Island.

A burning signpost. A round rainbow. Castanets playing random noises. A gold and silver cat. A spinning wheel. A knife with no handle. A bag as big as a mountain. A man hung from the top of a tower.

Seniolis howled in response to Kutori’s will. The overwhelming amount of Venom ignored the Beast and concentrated at the tip of the sword, which now pierced deep into the ground.

“Take…”

The entire body of the Kaliyon shone brilliantly, starting from the hilt and making its way down to the point.

“... that!!”

The ground sucked up all the light radiating from the sword.

A short silence followed.

Then, a deep rumble. A single crack emerged in the ground, then rapidly began to spread out like a spider's web until it covered the entire island. Light poured forth from the fissures, pushing them open even wider. The land cracked. The island began to fall.

In a desperate attempt to save itself, the Beast lashed out its vines and grabbed onto any nearby boulders it could find. But it did no good. The Beast, along with the boulders it clung to and the entire island itself, started its rapid descent to the vast continent below. Kutori felt like she heard it scream. Of course, she knew it was just her imagination.

"W-What do you think you're doing!?" Aiseia yelled.

Spreading her illusory wings, she flew over to Kutori, who was still on the Beast, using up the last reserves of her power. Aiseia managed to pick her up before it was too late. As they retreated, Nephren deflected the vines attacking them from behind.

"What a reckless…"

They stopped and turned around when they reached an altitude out of range of the Beast. The 15th Floating Island crumbled to pieces and fell before their eyes. The island, which Limeskin said only had about a 20% chance of falling when bombarded with the Winged Guard's entire stock of firepower, had been broken in a matter of seconds by just one Kaliyon.

"Kutori, can you hear me?" Aiseia asked, holding the blue haired fairy in her arms.

"Nn… I'm okay, I can hear you."

"Do you know what you've done?"

"Yeah… it's okay… I remember."

"It's not okay! Did you forget what kind of situation you're in!? I told you the encroachment would accelerate if you did anything crazy, didn't I!? Doing stuff like that will result in more than just a slightly shortened life span, you know!?"

"It's okay… it's okay." Kutori looked up with her pure red eyes and smiled feebly. "I promised to return home." Her fleeting smile seemed as if it would disappear at any moment. "I'll return home with my head held high and report to Willem: I was able to survive because of you. But I don't know what'll happen to me from now on, so stay by my side and teach me more forever and ever." She laughed.

"... ah, but I guess I'll have to keep the encroachment a secret from him. He'll definitely worry too much if he hears. I want him to stay who he is. A little absentminded at times, but always cool and reliable."

"Agh alright alright, you're starting to sound creepy!" Aiseia hugged her precious friend's thin body with what strength still remained inside her.

"Ow, that hurts, Aiseia."

"That's proof you're still alive. Deal with it."

Kutori gave up trying to resist and let her body relax.

She promised she would return home. She could live on as long as she clung to that promise. The problem was after that. After the promise was fulfilled, when she had nothing to hang on to any longer, what would happen to her?

Aiseia didn't ask, and Kutori didn't answer. She didn't want to know the answer. She wanted to keep averting her eyes from that question until the time came when she could no longer run away.

Part 2: The Guardians of the Sky

Upon one of the many floating islands in the sky lives an old man. There are few who know his name, yet also few who do not know of his existence. People simply call him the 'Great Sage'.

His personal history essentially includes the entire history of Regul Aire. For example, say you scoured the Cenart Library, the largest one up in the sky, and found the oldest book it had. It would probably be made with thick parchment and hand written with pen, having been made in an age without the current paper making and printing technologies. If you flipped through the pages, you would find an account of the birth of Regul Aire, the time when all life on the land verged on annihilation at the hands of the Beasts released by the Emnetwyte. When the few survivors were all gathered on Fistilas, Peak of the Gods, helpless against their death approaching at a frightening speed, a single man created a path to the skies with an enormous amount of Venom.

That savior would later become this old man, the Great Sage. Even the history books cannot reach further back in time than the wrinkles on the man's skin. That's how long this man has been alive, guiding and leading people.

"A man who can tune Dug Weapons?" The old man gave the silver eyed Prima lady who brought the news a suspicious look. She quickly turned pale and cowered with fear. "Ah, I'm not blaming you or anything. My eyes have been this way since I was born. No need to be afraid. Anyways, the one who came up with that worthless nonsense was Baroni Makish again?"

The lady nodded.

"For crying out loud, how can he not recognize such obvious lies? Maintenance of Dug Weapons is impossible. Even if the sun rose in the west, or snow fell in the middle of summer, or the Emnetwyte once again sprung up on the land, it will still never happen."

The lady gave him a quizzical look.

"What?" When the old man looked her way, she let out a little yelp and shrunk back again. "No need to be scared. If you have a question, feel free to ask."

"O-Oh no, your word choice just sounded a little odd to me. I'm sorry!"

"Hm? Ah, you are saying that if the Emnetwyte came back to life, then wouldn't they be able to tune their own weapons?"

The lady answered 'yes' in a barely audible voice.

"I keep telling you to not be afraid. It's a good question. If I didn't know much about the Emnetwyte, I would think the same thing. But the answer is no." The old man shook his head. "Dug Weapons, or Kaliyons, are collections of many Talismans bound together by magic. Now that may sound simple, but the word intricate does not even begin to describe the phenomenon by which different Talismans produce different effects by mutual interference with each other. Of course, it took a great deal of skill to tune such complicated systems. Getting a specific effect is like trying to stack a bunch of rocks on top of each other all the way up to the heavens."

"I see…" The lady looked slightly lost.

“Even among the Braves who fought with those weapons, only a handful could actually take care of their own sword. They weren’t expected to be able to. If you wanted to fix a beat up Kaliyon, you would usually need to assemble a team of specialty technicians to work on it in a workshop with the proper facilities.

Now you can see why that report must be bogus. A man able to do maintenance all by himself? Moreover, on the great sword Seniolis? And other swords too? Hah!

He probably exaggerated a bit to make his report more interesting, but he went too far. Even in the world of the Emnetwyte, there was no monster who had mastered such a skill. To claim such a thing is utterly ridiculous.”

“A monster… I believe you used that word before to describe someone. The Black Agate Swordmaster… or something like that.”

“Ahh… that’s right.” The old man cheered up a little when the lady continued the conversation. The hallway they were walking through always seemed excessively long, and there was nothing interesting to look at. Without anything to talk about, it got boring real fast. “He might have been capable of such a feat.”

With a faraway look in his eyes, the Great Sage began to talk about that man with a nostalgic tone in his voice. “He was truly a fearsome beast. He had no innate talent. The amount of Venom he could ignite was below average. Couldn’t cast simple spells. Even in swordsmanship, the path he ended up choosing, he only knew basic techniques.”

“So in other words… an ordinary person?”

“That’s right. At least, in the beginning he was. However, he aspired to be a Regal Brave. And he never gave up on that dream, no matter how many times his lack of talent was pointed out to him. To fill in his many gaps, he simply learned and learned everything he could. And what he obtained, he polished and polished until he had mastered it.

The result? A monster who could go into battle amongst guys wielding legendary swords with legendary techniques and still come home with the best results was born.”

The Great Sage shivered, perhaps out of fear, perhaps out of respect, and perhaps out of something entirely different. “With regards to pure strength and the number of things accomplishable with that strength, even back then I was ahead of him. But still, after hundreds of years, after I’ve acquired even more power, I can’t imagine myself winning in a fight against him.”

The lady looked down and tried to hold back a small laugh. “We have no knowledge of those legendary swords or techniques you speak of. Even if you talk of someone with greater strength than yourself, I cannot even begin to picture such a person.”

“That may be for the best. What was lost will never return. The events and people of that age are now no more than a source of nostalgia for me. We must live in the present.” The old man stopped walking. “Is it this room?”

“Yes. Do you still wish to meet him?”

“Well, you brought me all the way here, so I might as well see what kind of imposter we have with us.”

He turned the knob and pushed the door open.

A black haired young man sat with one elbow propped up on a reception desk, yawning in boredom.

"... hm?" The young man looked their way. "Ah, Suwon. Long time no see… you look pretty different now, huh?"

The Great Sage's jaw dropped.

"You've gotten quite a bit taller. Without that cloak I wouldn't have recognized you."

"Black Agate… Swordmaster…?" With a voice barely louder than a whisper, the Great Sage -- Suwon -- called the young man's name.

"Been a long time since anyone's called me that, Magus of the Polar Star. Glad to see you doing well."

Suwon Candel. Like Willem, he served as one of the members on the team of Braves called upon to defeat the Visitor Elq Harksten over five hundred years ago. The sages of the imperial capital cherished him from a young age, recognizing his immense talent as a thaumaturgist. On the battlefield, his strength rivaled that of the Quasi Braves. His fashion sense had some major flaws, he was a bit shorter than other boys his age, and sometimes he had a bit too much confidence in his abilities, but other than that he lived up to his reputation. Even though he had so much innate talent, he also had the diligence to put in hard work to improve even further and the modesty to recognize the talents of others around him. Moreover, he knew how to work as a team to accomplish a goal. He had almost everything.

To Willem, Suwon was a comrade he could trust and confide in, although he never told him that directly. And of course, Willem thought that Suwon had died in that battle five hundred years ago. However, the fact that Suwon survived and even became a founding pillar of Regul Aire didn't seem too farfetched.

For example, almost everything in Regul Aire was based on Emnetwyte culture, something Willem always thought of as strange. Well, backing up a few steps, the entire concept of Regul Aire seemed unnatural. If you gathered up all the different races, who lived completely separately from each other on the land, and stuffed them into one place, you might expect a survival of the fittest type power struggle to erupt. Why did they all just decide to work together to build towns and prosper up in their new home?

Now back to the first point, no matter where you go, every building in Regul Aire looks similar to the ones built by the Emnetwyte. Back on land, the beast people lived up in the trees or in gaps between the rocks. Orcs tended to dig out caves to reside in, the Reptrace made homes out of tent like structures built from grass, and the Ballmen and Prima didn't even have the concept of a permanent home. Now why did all those races get together and build Emnetwyte style houses to live in?

There were countless other examples: food, currency, sewing, social hierarchy, paper and book making, etc etc. In fact, it was hard to find even one counterexample. Regul Aire, a world in which many races except the Emnetwyte live, had come to closely resemble the old world where the Emnetwyte once lived.

Willem now had an explanation for all that: Suwon. In the founding of Regul Aire, he took the lead and essentially created the culture which would be dominant in the new world. Suwon's hometown was the imperial capital, and he also knew quite a bit of history. Now, the history of the imperial capital was filled with invasions and annexations, which made it a treasure box of examples of different people from different cultures being forced to live in the same place. With

all that experience and knowledge, there was no doubt that Suwon had the capability to create a new culture. After all, he was a genius.

"You were turned to stone!?" the old man asked hysterically. "After the battle, no matter how many times I tried sensing a heartbeat nearby I got no response, so I thought you were dead."

"I mean, how is my heart supposed to be moving if I'm a rock?"

"Give me back the tears I shed that day."

"Hm? You cried for me?"

"N-No! There's no way I would do such a thing for you! I knew you would live all along!" The old man's attitude at the moment didn't fit him at all.

"Well anyways, it was a lot of trouble. Before I actually did it, I never heard of anyone waking up after being turned to stone. As far as I was concerned, I was basically dead. Since I had a load of curses on me in addition to being petrified, it took a lot of time and money to get me back in working condition. Thanks to that, ever since I awoke I've just been paying off debt."

"Nonsense…"

It's not like Willem got turned into stone because he wanted to. And he didn't wake up and come back to life because he wanted to either. He could understand what Suwon must be feeling though, so he kept that to himself.

"Anyways, enough about me. How the hell did you get here? I heard the Emnetwyte went extinct. Even if they didn't, how are you still alive after all those years? I don't suppose that anyone else is still alive, are they?"

"Don't ask so much at once. Well, only one answer is needed for all three of those questions." As he spoke, Suwon stripped off his tunic and revealed his chest. A large hole gaped where his heart should have been.

"What…"

"I too was killed in that battle five hundred years ago by Jade Nail, one of the three earth gods, or Poteau, that protect the Visitors. I challenged him along with Emissa, but we both died without putting up much of a fight. Before I lost consciousness, I cast a spell on myself. I can't tell you the details, but I meddled with a part of my existence so that it wouldn't be lost to normal death. In my current form, I cannot die to a wound or old age. And of course, I am no longer Emnetwyte."

"I see…"

"Just to make things clear, I don't want your pity. I'm pretty satisfied with myself right now, and the thought of you feeling sorry for me makes me shiver."

"No, not you. I was shocked at hearing that Emissa died."

"Oi."

"So that explosive demon died, huh? I thought I already got all the sad out of me, but hearing about it again still gets me. So I assume the rest died too?"

"No, not everyone. Leila and Navrutri made it."

Suwon did not survive by leaping through time as Willem did while he was encased in stone. Suwon was alive and active the whole time. All five hundred years. Given that, he should know. He should know everything that occurred while Willem was a useless, sleeping rock.

“Hey--” There were mountains of questions he wanted to ask. Where did our master, who we couldn’t get in contact with, end up going? What happened to the army of monsters after their march on the capital? Did the princess and king who always supported us survive? “Just tell me one thing: what are those ‘17 Beasts’? What in the world happened while we were off fighting the Visitors?” Doing his best to push all those other things out of his head, Willem narrowed it down to a single question. The results of Leila’s battle. The safety of his friends. There was no point in asking about those now. Humanity was long gone; he already knew the answers. There was only one thing worth knowing about.

“Do you remember True World?”

Willem nodded. It was one of the religious organizations going against the government of the imperial capital. At the request of the royal family, he, Leila, and others had crushed them.

“The remnants of that group set up base in a small town outside the capital and started research on biological weapons. The ‘Beasts’ are the result of that research.”

“I see. So it really is true that the Emnetwyte destroyed the world.” Of course, the bad guys were only a very small fraction of the Emnetwyte. However, the other races about to go extinct didn’t exactly care. And long after the ordeal, there was no reason for anyone to try to recover the reputation of a long gone people.

“From the Military Police’s report, I heard you’re an enchanted weapons technician now?” Suwon, perhaps not wanting to talk about the Beasts, steered the conversation in a whole different direction.

Willem still wanted to know a little more about the past, but he decided to not go against Suwon. “It’s just on the documents, so I feel a little bad for the real enchanted weapons technicians, but…”

“What are you talking about? You think there are actually real Second Enchanted Weapons Technicians?”

“Huh?”

Suwon looked at Willem’s dumbfounded face with an even more dumbfounded one. “The nature of the second technician is completely different from that of the first or third or lower. I mean, it’s an empty job where you pretend you’re doing research but you know it’ll never get anywhere. The only real responsibility is to just be there, and that’s it. After all, it’s assumed that the research won’t produce any results, so writing a report is just a waste of time and paper. Pretty much all of the previous people in your position were officers who got a little too annoying and consequently received a demotion. The job gets only the bare minimum amount of authority and pay.”

Suwon took a deep breath. “That research which was never expected to get anywhere was research into the fundamentals of the Kaliyon. In other words, you can give a whole new meaning to the post of Second Enchanted Weapons Technician.”

“Well, this job is good enough for me. I get to relax since it’s not really a job at all, and it’s not like I want more authority or money.”

“Agh!” Suwon propped his elbows on the desk and buried his head in his hands.

“What’s wrong?”

“I can’t decide if it’s the perfect job for you or the biggest waste in all of Regul Aire. You’re the only one who can perform maintenance on the Kaliyons, something which can unlock huge potential in our fighting power. But to have you wasting away there doing nothing…”

He seemed to be complaining about something, but he talked in a quiet voice so Willem couldn’t really hear. “Anyways, that Military Police officer said he needed to ask the Great Sage about what to do with me or something. Sorry for the rush, but could you decide quickly? I promised I’d be home soon.”

“Home?” Suwon raised his head. “You mean that fairy warehouse?”

“What else would I mean? I doubt my home down there is still around. It’s true that it would be nice to talk to an old friend for a bit longer, but fortunately we both look healthy. We can meet again on a later day.”

“Ah…” Suwon mumbled. “... well before that, there’s someone I want you to meet.”

“What, there’s still more? It’s already been two days, you know? I got hungry kids to feed at home.”

“If he knew you were alive, I’m sure he would want to meet you. As for you, well, you probably never wanted to see him again. Still, you can’t ignore this chance.”

“An acquaintance of mine? If you know him too, then that means it’s someone from back then?”

Suwon failed to answer.

“Come on, who is it? I’m just an ordinary Emnetwyte. Besides you, I’m pretty sure I didn’t know anyone who could live for hundreds of--” Willem suddenly cut himself off. Someone he met in the previous world. Someone who both he and Suwon knew. Someone who could remain undying for hundreds of years. He could think of just one who fit those criteria. “-- Don’t tell me…”

“We’ll talk on the way over.” Suwon stood up.

“Wait. I haven’t said I’ll go.”

“Well? Do you plan on saying that you won’t?”

Willem was at a loss for words. Suwon, taking that as an answer, flung the door open forcefully and spoke loudly to the lady waiting there quietly.

“We head for the 2nd Floating Island. Prepare an airship immediately! … ah, don’t be scared. My fault for raising my voice; I’m not trying to yell at you. I should have opened the door more gently too, so you don’t have to cower in fear.”

The 2nd Floating Island, also known as the Heart of the World Tree. If you look down on Regul Aire from above, it sits almost right in the dead center. Naturally, you might expect it to be a major trade center. However, not a single one of the inter-island airships stop there. There are three reasons for this.

First, there are no villages or cities on the island, meaning there isn’t actually anyone to benefit from trade. Second, it floats at a much higher altitude than all the other islands, and it is usually surrounded by wild storm clouds, prohibiting even well built airships from passing. And third, it is sacred ground.

Fundamentally speaking, all things fall down. The many huge islands floating in the sky which make up Regul Aire then seem to contradict the laws of nature. The secret which enables

this is said to be on the 2nd Island. To disrupt the sacred grounds would mean causing the fall of the world, so any entry is forbidden.

Still, occasionally salvagers who think they can uncover the truth veiled behind the scams of religion try to reach the island. Most of them return home battered and bruised by the violent storms and air currents surrounding the island without even getting a glimpse of it.

Sometimes, salvagers appear claiming to have seen what lies beyond those clouds. They say that it is not a giant rock in the sky like the other floating islands, but a massive chunk of polished black quartz. That countless plants grow on its surface without regards for the seasons; spring and autumn flowers bloom at the same time. Their tales almost all sound like incoherent delusions. Of course, hardly anyone actually believes them, so the 2nd Floating Island still remains shrouded in mystery.

"... that's one big chunk of black quartz. Or is it a flower pot?"

Suwon nodded. "Apparently it's something like one giant Talisman, but I don't know the details. When it's that big, I also don't feel like trying to figure it out myself."

"There sure are a lot of different trees growing in that big flower pot."

"There's some sort of barrier around the island which controls the climate, allowing it to be simultaneously all four seasons inside. The storm clouds around us are a byproduct of that. By the way, I don't know why they set it up."

"For a Great Sage, you seem to not know a lot."

Obviously ruffled by Willem's remark, Suwon responded, "A sage knows what he needs to know. Only one who does understand anything thinks that he should know everything."

"Whoa there are bugs flying around! Bugs! The seasons are really out of whack!"

"Listen when people talk!"

For a floating island, the 2nd was pretty far on the small side of the spectrum. It didn't even have a harbor district of any kind. Willem wondered what they were supposed to do without anywhere to anchor onto, but the small airship prepared by the Great Sage landed without difficulty on a small, flat clearing.

"Wow, this is nice. You should give me one. Seems useful for grocery shopping." The harbor district on the 68th Island was quite far from the fairy warehouse, making it rather inconvenient when trying to go shopping on another floating island.

"Don't be stupid. You can't simply buy one of these for any amount of money."

"Well that's unfortunate."

They got off the airship. Despite it looking like a very small island from a distance, it felt a lot bigger when Willem actually stood on the ground. Looking around, all he could see were various plants confused about what season it was. It made for rather eerie scenery.

"What is this? An apple and a peach are growing side by side."

"If you're hungry, it's okay to eat one. There's no poison."

"I think I'll pass…" Willem couldn't help but think that they must be using some sort of sketchy fertilizer. He didn't even want to touch one, let alone eat it. "Well anyways, is that where we're headed?"

In the center of the island stood a black tower, probably made of the same material as the bottom of the island. At least from where Willem stood, it looked to be the only building on the entire island.

“It’s black, has thorns all over it… gives off a temple of evil vibe.”

“Correct… I’ve known him for a long time, but I never understood that fashion sense of his.”

“Look who’s talking.” Willem chuckled. “Even after five hundred years, that preference of yours for oversized white cloaks never got better, huh?”

“Don’t make it sound like a disease. It is a part of me. Even if a thousand years passed, I wouldn’t get rid of it.”

The nostalgia and memories evoked by their playful conversation almost made Willem want to cry. It was a conversation he should have never gotten the chance to have again, with a friend he should have never gotten to meet again. Just because of that, these few minutes felt infinitely precious to him.

“Hey…”

“What?”

“Thanks.”

“... and why am I being thanked now?”

“I just felt like it. Don’t worry about it.”

Suwon had become the Great Sage, but the Great Sage was no longer Suwon. He had gone through five hundred years of life, obtaining many new things and changing himself. That much was obvious. After all, an old man wouldn’t have the same mannerisms he had when he was a teenage boy.

Despite that, Suwon now talked and acted like the old Suwon that Willem once knew. And Willem was smart enough to realize that Suwon was probably behaving differently on purpose for him. The pain of losing friends, family, home, and everything else -- Suwon had already experience it once, and he knew that Willem was now in the same position. To make Willem feel a little more at ease, he was acting like his old self.

“What are you smiling all creepily about?”

Or maybe he was still just a young man at heart. That was a possibility, but one that Willem didn’t really want to think about after he had just thanked Suwon.

The tower was empty. They pushed open the heavy doors climbed up a long spiral staircase only to find an uninhabited throne room.

“What’s going on?”

“It’s not unusual. The weather’s good today, so he’s probably taking a walk.”

“Huh?”

“Well, as you can see, there’s hardly anything on this island except plants. Which means there’s hardly anything to do to pass the time, so whenever the weather’s nice he usually strolls around outside,” Suwon explained as he walked up to the window. “Look, there he is.”

Looking down, Willem spotted a lady wearing a maid uniform pushing a large luggage cart.

“... who’s that girl?”

So it's not an uninhabited island, Willem thought as he observed the woman. From his angle, he couldn't see her face, but from the triangular ears he guessed she was an Ayrantrobos. Despite pushing what looked like a very heavy load, she maintained perfect posture.

"Not her. Look over there."

Willem turned to where Suwon pointed and saw a black something resting on top of the cart. At first he thought it was just a rock, but his gut feeling told him otherwise. He couldn't pinpoint the exact reason, but something felt a little off.

"Hey, you piece of trash! We've come by for a visit!" Suwon called out with a voice loud as thunder.

"Ah, the Great Sage! Perfect timing! I was just wondering what to do with all my free time!"

The black something moved. It was a skull. Or at least, it had the shape of a skull. It was pitch black and about as big as an adult's armful. It was just a skull, if you ignore the part where it moved on its own, looked up to them, and moreover started talking in an old man's voice. In other words, well, it wasn't really just a skull.

"We didn't get to finish our game last time either. Today we'll make it clear who the better player is!"

Unfortunately, Willem recognized that voice. He had unmistakably met the owner of that voice just two years ago -- well, to the rest of the world it would be about five hundred years. The events that occurred that day Willem would probably never forget. Those memories had been carved vividly somewhere deep inside him.

"Apologies, but I have not come to play around or cure your boredom today! There is someone I want you to meet, Ebon Candle!"

The two old men exchanged intimidating yet friendly shouts between the top and bottom of the tower.

"What… you have a guest? Tell me sooner, fool!"

"You were the one out taking a leisurely walk! If you have a problem with it, then just get a communication crystal! Then I'll be able to actually tell you before I come!"

"Don't be stupid! You know communications can't pass through the barrier around the island!"

"Then do something about that! Or is that too complicated for an immortal god!?"

"I see your mouth has grown big, despite you only living five hundred years! Wait there, I'll come and crush you on the game board!"

"I told you, I have other business today!"

"Oh, that's right! Kaiya, sorry but can you please hurry?"

The lady in the maid uniform nodded and started running while she pushed the cart. Before long, they reached the gates of the black quartz tower and started ascending the spiral staircase, making loud clattering noises as they went.

"-- By the way, Suwon." Willem groaned as he pressed his fingertips strongly against his forehead, trying to suppress a headache. "I'm just having a bad dream, right?"

"I understand how you must feel, but face reality. If you want, I can give you a slap." Suwon readied his hand in front of Willem.

“I’ll pass. If you do that, my head might go flying off before I wake up.”

“Hm. Boring.”

The noisy clanking drew closer to the throne room.

“Hahahah!”

Willem thought he felt a strong wind blowing from the throne. But it was not true wind, rather it was the result of Venom so overwhelmingly strong he could feel it on his skin. Willem knew only one person, or being, who could output such force.

“Long time no see, Brave! To think that we would cross the centuries and meet again! Truly an unexpected reunion!”

He was one of the three earth gods, or Poteau, in charge of protecting the Visitor Elq Harksten who stood before Willem and the other Braves at that battle long ago, their last and strongest opponent.

“But unfortunately, we are destined enemies! This miraculous reunion will soon be stained with blood!”

He was known by many names. The One who Sleeps in Death. The Weaver of the World. The Father of the Land. The One who Shines Darkness in the Garden of Light - - Ebon Candle.

In that ancient battle, none other than Quasi Brave Willem Kumesh defeated him in exchange for the young man’s own life. But, just as he told his opponent before dying, he had simply passed into a long sleep before reawakening.

“No, I think I’m good.” Willem, still dumbfounded, shook his hands in refusal.

“Hm. Boring.” The skull, Ebon Candle, suppressed his Venom. The threatening air which filled the throne room disappeared instantly. “I thought you would have a lot of hatred for me built up, so I was going to let you get it all out, but…”

“You have a weird way of being considerate of others.”

“So are you trying to say you have no hatred?”

“Even if I did, why would I go through something as troublesome as a rematch? Before, I fought because I had people to protect behind me and you were trying to hurt them. That’s not the case anymore, so there’s no reason to fight. Am I wrong?”

“You fought to the point of throwing away your own life, yet bear no grudges… you’re a simpler man than I thought.”

“I mean, even if I had a reason to fight, what is with you? The Ebon Candle I fought had skin and flesh and a body below his head. Why did that turn into a head riding around on a cart leisurely sunbathing!?”

“What are you talking about? You were the one who burned away my skin, flesh, and body.”

“Well that’s true, but how are you not fully recovered after sleeping for a hundred years!?”

“I’m telling you, it’s all your fault. Since you destroyed me so thoroughly, my body couldn’t heal in time. Do you know how surprised I was when I woke up? I wanted to start crying, but I didn’t even have any tear glands!”

“Who cares!?”

“And after that, I kept having to use power, so I haven’t gotten the chance to recover further. As you can see, after four hundred years I’m still in this disgraceful shape.”

The black skull reclined on his throne. Willem had some doubts about whether or not his current state was actually disgraceful, but in the end who really cared.

“Alright, that’s enough. Suwon, I assume you didn’t just bring me here to say hello. Let’s get to your real business.”

“Real business?” the skull asked.

“Ahh.” Suwon nodded. “This fellow is rotten to the core, but he is exceptionally skilled and we can trust him. He will be an essential part of our plan.”

“Hmm…”

“Hey! Who are you calling rotten to the core!?” Willem retorted.

“Willem, don’t you want to take back the land?”

“Don’t try to change the topic on -- the land?” That word made Willem forget about Suwon’s insults for a moment. “I mean, it’s all already destroyed, and the Beasts roam freely. What are you trying to accomplish?”

“We will bring the fight to them… well of course, the land is too big to take it all back at once. First we will take back nearby Fistilas, Peak of the Gods, and use it as our base of operations. The two most important things we need are a way to fight the Beasts and a way to maintain the fighting. All this time, we were missing the latter. But now, with you here, we can take a giant leap forward. You can fix any unstable or broken Kaliyon. That’s huge.”

“I see…” Willem nodded slightly. “That’s a pretty ambitious plan.”

“I know, right? Of course, it’s an extremely long term plan and one which will require the combined forces of every city in Regul Aire. It’ll be very dangerous and may not yield immediate results, but in the end I believe we have a good chance at victory.” As Suwon talked, he became more and more excited. “Until now, only the number of working Kaliyons has been a problem, since we can produce as many fairies as we want.”

“-- Oh?” Willem nodded slightly again.

Suwon, probably noticing his distasteful remark, lost his momentum. “Ah, never mind. That was… er....”

“It’s okay, Suwon. I think I figured it out. Ebon Candle used necromancy in his battle against me. I imagine sleeping off death for a hundred years must be a similar type of magic too. And the spell you used to let a part of yourself live on when you died must be the same kind of thing as well. Lastly, you two guys are the guardians of Regul Aire. At that point it became pretty obvious to me.”

From what Willem learned in his research, fairies are the lost souls of deceased children unable to understand death. Usually, they appear naturally in an unstable form, such as a will-o’-wisp or dwarf. And apparently, they can be artificially created and used through necromancy techniques.

The Leprechauns that Willem knew were definitely not will-o’-wisps or dwarves. Maybe they were unstable, but they had the body and mind of the Emnetwyte. Inside their hearts, they held hope, fear, love, admiration, persistence, despair. And with those emotions, they continued to fight and throw their lives away.

“Anyone could figure it out with all that evidence.” Willem was almost completely convinced that his guess was right. Overcome with strange emotions which made him want to cry and burst out laughing at the same time, Willem put to words the conclusion that had been brewing in his mind. “You guys are the ones creating the fairies, aren’t you?”

Part 3: A Short Time After

Recently, rumors have been going around that rain is leaking into the hallway on the second floor. A quick visit confirmed that some carpentry work was indeed necessary. Someone could be called in from town on a later day, but for now it could use some rough patching up. Which meant he needed some wooden boards and a–

“-- Hey, do you know where the wooden hammer is?” Willem turned around.

The storage room on the first floor. You used it before… have you already forgotten? Kutori answered. *Wow, you really are bad at remembering things…* She tried to sound a little irritated, but in truth she was just poking fun at Willem.

However, before she could finish her complaint, she noticed something wrong: Willem wasn’t looking at her. *What are you looking at?* She turned around, but no one else was there, only the empty hallway.

“Kutori, where did you go?” Willem asked and started scanning the area around him.

What are you talking about? I’m right here, she said in a stronger voice than before.

“That’s weird. I thought you were right here.” Willem, still not facing Kutori, seemed to ignore her calls.

Hey, cut it out--

She reached out with her hand, or she tried to. She couldn’t. The hand she meant to use didn’t exist in the first place. Looking down at her body, Kutori realized that it wasn’t there.

“Kutori? Where are you hiding?” Willem started walking.

He wandered all throughout the fairy warehouse, searching for the invisible girl. He didn’t find her. He left the warehouse and searched all throughout the island. He didn’t find her. He grabbed anyone he saw and asked about Kutori Nota Seniolis. He received no answers.

Where are you going?

What are you looking for?

I’m right here.

By your side.

Hey.

Hey!

Notice me.

No matter how much Kutori tried to speak, she failed to produce a voice. And of course, words that fail to become sound reach no one.

Eventually, Willem grew tired of walking and stood still, lost and confused. Someone placed a hand on his shoulder.

“It’s time for you to accept it already,” Naigrat said gently with a lonely smile on her face. “They’re already dead.”

-- Kutori jolted up, sending her covers flying everywhere.

Her heart showed no signs of slowing its rapid pounding. Holding her hand over her violently pulsing chest, she took deep breaths. When she finally calmed down a bit, her body shivered. The cold bite of the winter morning mercilessly attacked her through her pajamas, draining her of warmth. She got out of bed, picked up her blankets, wrapped them into a ball, and hugged them tightly.

"A dream…" Kutori murmured. "A dream, right?"

She looked up at the window. The world outside was still enveloped in the darkness of night, waiting for the delayed winter dawn.

Her body felt sluggish. She wanted to snuggle in her blankets once more and go back to sleep. But she couldn't. Her eyes refused to close, knowing that they might see the continuation of that dream.

Two days have passed since the end of the battle on the 15th Island and the fairies' arrival back at the warehouse.

Willem has yet to return home.

The torrential rain that started pouring with the rise of the sun abruptly stopped a little before noon. Underneath the miraculously clear blue sky, small fairy girls burst out onto the grounds. The clean white ball they carried out with them quickly became caked with mud. Soon enough, the girls excitedly chasing it around became covered in the stuff too.

In a corner of the reading room, Nephren was enjoying a nap. Using her arms folded on a desk as a pillow, she snored peacefully with a gentle expression on her face.

"Well that's unusual for Ren, throwing away a book like that," Aiseia said as she picked up the book lying under Nephren's desk. "For her, the main problem is probably not overuse of Venom, but just regular fatigue. She hasn't had much experience since becoming fully grown, so her stamina still has a ways to go. But still she made it through that long battle." Aiseia softly patted Nephren's head.

"... and are you doing much better, Aiseia?"

"Me? I feel good as new! I have confidence in my longevity," Aiseia answered proudly.

Kutori wasn't fully convinced. Her golden haired friend always said important things in a way that made it impossible to tell whether she was being serious or joking. As a result, Kutori never knew what to believe.

"And how are you doing, Kutori?" Aiseia shot the question back at her.

"Me? I'm… uh…" *Doing fine of course*, she begun to say. She wanted to say it. But in the end, Kutori couldn't. In contrast with their casual tones, Aiseia was glaring at Kutori with a dead serious look. "I guess I'm not in the best shape. Probably don't want to fight for a while." She put on a weak smile and shrugged her shoulders.

"Well if it starts to look really bad, maybe you should request to go back to the 11th Island. You'll probably be given permission since you're such an important soldier right now and all, and I'm sure the doctor can at least give you some advice."

"I told you, I'm fine. It's just a little more uncomfortable than usual." Kutori shook her head. "You giving me advice is all I need. I trust you."

“Well, I’m glad, but…” Aiseia twirled her messy hair around.

“Besides, it would suck if I left then he came back, right? I want to see him as soon as possible, so I need to wait at home like he said.”

“Ah… you’ve gone full maiden in love mode, I see.”

“Mhm, that’s right.”

“Not gonna try and hide it anymore?”

“Well, he knows my feelings but still tries to run away. I definitely won’t be able to get him if I keep pretending. At this point, I think going straight at him without hiding anything is my only option. He may seem like he has things together in his own little world, but if even something small goes wrong, he can get really thrown off.”

“Hmm, that’s true.”

“So as soon as he gets home, I’m going to go all out for him. Of course, you’ll have to help me some, so be ready.”

“Ookay, leave it to me.” Aiseia gave a thumbs up.

Kutori returned the gesture. There were no lies in her words just now. If he came home, she would go at him relentlessly. The key word was ‘if’.

Originally, he hadn’t been here. Which means, the current state of the fairy warehouse without him was how things were meant to be.

“Maybe he won’t come home.” The words lingering in Kutori’s mind sometimes escaped her lips in moments of weakness. “I mean, he’s such a valuable person to Regul Aire it’s almost unbelievable he’s been here all this time. You would think he would be appointed to some super high position and be begged to share all his arcane knowledge. So maybe it’s best if he never comes home.”

She received varied responses when she said that in front of people.

“We won’t let him!” “I don’t want to be lonely.” “I will be the one to defeat the technician!” “What is arcane?” It was questionable whether or not Tiat and the other little ones actually understood what Kutori was talking about.

“You should be a little more honest with yourself,” Naigrat said in a somewhat scolding voice.

Nephren only lowered her eyes and failed to react any further. Well, Kutori didn’t really expect much more.

“Well if he doesn’t, what are you going to do?” Aiseia asked back with a teasing smile.

What would she do if he really didn’t come home? Kutori thought about it, but couldn’t come up with an answer. “I guess I wouldn’t do anything…” Her vague answer caused Aiseia to sigh overdramatically.

Originally, he hadn’t been here. Which means, her current everyday life without him by her side was the life she was meant to live.

“Haaa!”

Hearing a sharp, but cute, battle cry from behind, Kutori instinctively dodged out of the way. Panival and Colon crashed onto the ground, failing to catch their target.

“... what are you guys doing?” She helped the two up.

“I told you!” Lagging behind her companions, Tiat came running in and poked the two on their red noses. A pair of little yelps rang throughout the hallway. “There’s no way you guys could catch Kutori. You still have ten years to go.” For some reason, Tiat stuck her chest out proudly.

“But without Willem around, we have no one to practice on, and our skills get worse,” a teary eyed Colon said.

“What skills…”

“Skills to conquer the world!” Panival made a fist.

“What world…”

Tiat stood off to the side disgusted while Lakish joined the crowd and started apologizing profusely.

“... oh yeah, by the way, Tiat,” Kutori said.

“Ah, yes?”

“You’ve been confirmed as a fully grown fairy, right? Have you already had your compatibility with Dug Weapons checked?”

“Not yet. Naigrat said to wait until Willem comes home before we start looking for a sword.”

“... I see.” Kutori ruffled the little girl’s hair a bit.

“K-Kutori?”

“I hope you get a good one,” she said gently before drawing her hand back.

“Is something wrong? You don’t look so good.”

“Really? Maybe I’m just tired still.” Kutori laughed it off.

When Kutori returned to her room, she shut the door behind her and leaned back on it, gradually sliding down until she sat on the floor. She curled up into a ball, wrapping her arms tightly around her knees and dropping her head.

“That liar…” she muttered quiet enough so that only she could hear. “I kept my side of the promise. But why… why can’t you…”

After a while, Kutori raised her head and stood up. The closed door and curtains made the room almost as dark as night, but she knew it well enough. She made her way through the dim light to her desk and picked up the mirror lying on it.

“...”

In the darkness spreading out on the other side of the mirror stood a red eyed girl.

A flat spider.

“Who are you?” Kutori asked in a trembling voice to the stranger beyond the mirror.

She should be seeing a familiar face, the one that she sees every morning when she washes it. She should be seeing that face whose every expression she had seen so many times they were getting boring.

Yet why? Why was the girl on the other side staring blankly back at her? Why did Kutori take one look at that face and think it was a stranger’s? If it was someone she didn’t know, then who was standing on this side of the mirror?

A half eaten cookie. A worn out candle and a burnt envelope. A steel bird and a rainbow arrowhead.

Shut up. Shut up shut up shut up.

Why? Why did these memories keep flowing out?

The battle had ended many days ago. She hadn't used magic even once after that. Wasn't she supposed to get better? If she practiced moderation, wasn't there supposed to not be any harmful impact on her everyday life? Was Aiseia lying?

No.

It was her own fault.

During the battle, she threw something important away in the name of determination. In exchange for the miraculous destruction of the 15th Island, she sold almost all of her remaining time.

She didn't regret it. Or no, she couldn't regret it. Regul Aire was on the verge of annihilation. Saving it by slightly reducing the lifespan of a disposable soldier was a bargain.

The thing she should regret was feigning her well being in front of Willem after the battle. She didn't want him to worry. She wanted to return home to the normal Willem. So she kept quiet about the encroachment and forbade Aiseia and Nephren from talking about it. But now, she was already in this condition.

She at least wanted to say 'I'm home'. And also…

"I wanted to eat that butter cake…" she murmured with a quivering voice.

The girl on the other side of the mirror moved her lips as if repeating after Kutori.

A single tear streamed down the side of her cheek.

A broken world. A fish swimming amongst the stars. A yellow stuffed animal. An unfamiliar girl with blue eyes. A soft tree. A continually purring black cat. A pebble wrapped in paper. A bright cloudy sky. The world beyond the mirror. And. And.

The mirror fell out of the girl's hand and shattered on the floor, sending countless shards flying about.

The girl collapsed on the ground.

Part 4: When That Battle Ends

"You guys are the ones creating the fairies, aren't you?"

The two that Willem spoke to showed no signs of denying his guess.

"Correct, but we are not going around creating each and every one of them separately. We perform the necessary spells on large souls which serve as the ingredients required for the fairies to naturally appear," Suwon explained with a stern face.

"We also meddled with the barrier surrounding Regul Aire so that those souls don't fall to the ground. Well, are you going to act differently now that you've heard all this?" Ebon Candle added on. Unlike Suwon, Ebon Candle's expression didn't seem to change (that is, if skulls could make expressions). His voice also remained normal; he was simply waiting to observe Willem's reaction.

Remaining silent, Willem suddenly grabbed Suwon by the collar and raised his clenched fist. He set his aim for Suwon's cheek and held the pose for a few seconds.

“Punching you guys won’t help anything…”

There was no point in blaming the fairy system itself. The power of the Kaliyons was necessary to protect Regul Aire, and Emnetwyte Braves were necessary to use that power. Since there weren’t any of those around anymore, Suwon and Ebon Candle created Leprechauns as replacements. If they didn’t, Regul Aire would no longer be around.

The fairy system was the best system and the only possible system. There was no room for ethics or morality to enter the argument. The fairies were not forced to fight out of ill will, but out of necessity.

Willem himself couldn’t fight. He stood with all the others in Regul Aire, unable to do anything but see the fairies off to battle and wait. No matter how much that irritated him, or no matter how much he wanted to change that, he still couldn’t blame Suwon.

“But remember this. The Braves fight to protect the people and the towns they live in, not to conquer territory out of greed. Don’t throw them away in a war we don’t need to fight,” Willem said, then let go of Suwon.

“It’s not an unnecessary war. You must understand too, right? Regul Aire won’t last forever. We’ve somehow lasted for five hundred years, but the next hundred aren’t guaranteed. We must return to the land eventually.”

“That’s just me and you, isn’t it?”

“-- What do you mean?”

“Very few have ever laid eyes upon the world that once existed on the land five hundred years ago. To everyone else, down there is just a faraway place. Maybe some idealize it as a treasure island of dreams and adventure, but we all know that’s not real. To everyone besides us, home sweet home is here, up in the sky. Not down there. Am I wrong?”

“But… are you not bothered by it? Don’t you want to go home!? I’ve lived here for five hundred years, longer than I lived down there! This is unmistakably my second home. But my first home is still that imperial capital! It’s the same for you too, isn’t it!? No, it should be even more so for you, since you just came here! I know you haven’t forgotten!”

“Even if we gather all of Regul Aire’s strength and manage to take back the land…” In contrast to Suwon’s exasperation, Willem responded quietly and calmly. “... who will be there? Will anyone be there to welcome us home?”

“...” Suwon was at a loss for words. He opened his mouth as if trying to say something, but soon closed it again.

“Will you not tell him?” Ebon Candle asked.

“No.” Suwon shook his head, then turned back to Willem. “So is that your final opinion, Willem Kumesh?”

Willem’s old friend Suwon Candel was no longer there. Before him was now the Great Sage, the man who had borne the future of Regul Aire on his back for five hundred years. His once fluffy blonde hair had grown lighter, his young skin was now covered with wrinkles, and his small body had grown up into a giant’s.

-- And now, the man once praised as a genius child was attempting to risk the present and future to take back the past.

“Sorry, Great Sage.” Willem put on the best smile he could to hide the loneliness beneath. “I’m done fighting for the far off future of the world.”

"... I thought you were more like a Brave than that."

"I did too." Willem nodded.

The thing that Willem once aspired to be, even going so far as to obtain the title of Quasi Brave. However, he never made it any further. He blamed it on his lack of talent. He blamed it on his background. But maybe, just maybe, he was wrong. Perhaps he lacked something different entirely.

"I thought that too. I truly believed I could become a Brave. But I was wrong. And that's why I'm living in this disgraceful state now."

"Hm. Let me ask one more thing," the skull said from the side.

The black skull rolled off his throne and back onto the luggage cart, which had a cushion on it to soften his fall. The maid lady who had stood nearby quietly the whole time wheeled him over to where Suwon and Willem stood.

"Earlier when I challenged you, you said you had no reason to fight. And even if you did have such a reason, how did the great, charming, majestic god Ebon Candle you once knew become reduced to such a modest form?" Willem had no recollection of wording it like that, but… "You skillfully avoided the matter, but you cannot fool me. Even if you had a reason to fight, there is something preventing you from doing so. Is that right?"

"Hm?" The Great Sage raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, that's right." Willem nodded. "While thankfully I'm not just some skull, my body has hardly recovered from my battle with this guy. The petrification and curses have been lifted, but I'm still a mess thanks to the wounds that remained all over my body. A troll I know even told me she could bite through my flesh without cutting it up first."

"I see. Trolls really do have an eye for meat. In other words, you have lost the strength you once held. Even if you want to fight, you cannot. Which means, if we tried to make you obey by force, you would have no means to resist, am I wrong?" Ebon Candle said.

"Hm. I guess you are correct." Willem scratched his head. "Well all I can say is I hope you don't decide to do that. It may sound cliche, but someone is waiting for my return home."

"You fear for your life?"

"No, it's just that after I beat you guys up I'd have no way to get out of here." Willem shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know how to fly an airship."

"Hah! I like it. You haven't changed one bit." For some reason, the black skull seemed happy upon hearing Willem's response. He then turned toward Suwon and said, "Great Sage, let us give up for the time being. This one's will is strong. It seems that unmoving will is the essence of this man. He can only have one goal at a time, and he sees no value in anything not directly related to his current goal. That's why he will not bend. He will not stop. He will keep pushing himself to his limits. Now that he has decided he needs to protect the fairies, that is everything to him. He will protect them no matter what sacrifice is necessary, and I do not wish to be on the receiving end of those forbidden spells once more."

Well, that won't happen anyways, Willem thought. Forbidden spells are not to be taken lightly. In the first place, he no longer fulfilled the conditions to cast most of the spells he used back in that battle. He might be able to pull off a couple, but as a result he would either die or, if he was lucky, turn back into stone. Either way, he wouldn't be able to return home. Well, he

didn't need to explain all that. Ebon Candle seemed to be overestimating Willem, so maybe it would be best to roll with it.

"But…" Suwon started to protest.

"If you cannot accept it, then maybe you should tell him everything. If you reveal one or two of the truths about the land you've been hiding, I suspect his attitude will change."

"No!" Suwon raised his voice, a hint of panic on his face.

"... truths about the land?" Willem eyed Suwon suspiciously. "What have you been hiding from me?"

"... it has no relation to you."

"Don't tell such an obvious lie. From what this skull over here is saying, it'll make me change my mind."

"I will say nothing," Ebon Candle replied.

"Well, looks like it's up to you, Great Sage."

"I too will remain silent. It is related to the future of this world, and I see that you have no interest in that."

You bastard. As Willem was about to say something not so nice in return, he heard footsteps coming up the spiral staircase.

"I seem to have many guests today," muttered Ebon Candle.

All four pairs of eyes gathered on the door to the throne room. Before long, their visitor appeared: the Haresantrobos First Officer.

"Excuse me for intruding."

"This is sacred ground. I believe I told you not to enter!" The Great Sage scolded him in a thunderous voice.

The Haresantrobos nodded and bowed slightly. "I am aware. However, I bring urgent news."

"-- What is it?" the Great Sage pressed for further details, in a calm voice this time.

The Haresantrobos looked at Willem for a moment, then whispered something in the Great Sage's ear.

"... and you judged that as so urgent you needed to rush into sacred territory to report it?"

"Yes." The Haresantrobos nodded at the Great Sage's curious question.

"Understood. I will tell this man myself." The Great Sage stepped closer to Willem.

"... what? Is it something related to me?"

"That's right, Willem Kumesh, Second Enchanted Weapons Technician." The Great Sage spoke in a grim voice. "There has been contact from someone in the Orlandri Trading Company. The user of Dug Weapon Seniolis has suffered from personality destruction due to encroachment from the previous life. Vanishing of the physical body has not yet begun, but it is only a matter of time."

The pale faced Willem stepped onto the First Officer's airship and departed the sacred grounds. The two left behind stood in heavy silence, gazing beyond the sea of clouds where the young man now sailed.

“Why did you not tell him everything?” Ebon Candle finally spoke. “What is on the land. What continues to lurk there. If he knew, his answer would have been different.”

“Probably,” the Great Sage answered with a bitter face. “But his spirit would have been crushed. Those kind of people who can fight endlessly just on one belief cannot do anything when their spirit breaks. If a spear is rusted, it may still be used. But if the tip is broken, it is done.”

“That depends on how you tell him. You are skilled at manipulating people with information, are you not?”

“I suppose. He’s a simple man. I would be able to manipulate him easily, but…” The old man shrugged his shoulders. “Laugh if you want, but I cannot do it. He is someone I used to admire as an older brother. I cannot bring myself to lie to him.”

“Well, let us hope it turns out for the best.” Ebon Candle sighed somehow, despite not having lungs. “A broken fairy will never return. That man’s spirit may be crushed anyways.”

Part 5: Unkept Promises

Willem remembered absolutely nothing about the journey home. All he knew was that he boarded that Military Police airship on the 2nd Island and eventually arrived on the 68th. They might have taken a few detours to refuel or avoid flying debris, but they probably took the shortest and fastest route possible. But unfortunately, and obviously, Willem did not make it in time.

A blue haired girl lay on the bed, sleeping quietly. Or at least, that’s what it looked like. It seemed as if she might stir and open her eyes at any moment. But that never happened, and it never will.

“She kept her side of the promise, ya know?” Aiseia said in a quiet voice, standing in the doorway. “She survived and returned home. She made it back with barely any time left from a battle she should have never lived through, all because she wanted to meet you one more time.”

“Aiseia.” Nephren, also standing near the door, shook her head. “We can’t blame Willem. We were the ones who didn’t tell him about Kutori.”

“I know I know, I didn’t mean to blame him…”

“No, you’re right. I’m the one who didn’t keep my promise. I’m the one who should be blamed,” Willem murmured. “She did what I told her to, but I didn’t follow up. That’s all this is.”

To the fairy soldiers, death is always lurking nearby. They are aware of the fleeting nature of their own lives, and therefore tend to not grieve when a friend is lost. Their spirits are not diminished by death. That way, their effectiveness as weapons does not degrade.

“Hey hey, does anyone know where Naigrat went?” Lakish entered the playroom, looking around as she asked the other littles ones there.

“Haven’t seen her. Do you need something?” Colon asked as she practiced her joint locks on a teddy bear.

“I wanted to ask her about this weekend’s shopping. Blizzards might be coming soon, so I was wondering if we should stock up on extra supplies.”

“Ah, I see! You can’t fight on an empty stomach!”

“... if you’re looking for Naigrat, she’s probably in the mountains,” Panival answered as she kicked a ball against the wall. “Whenever someone doesn’t come home, she goes there.”

“Ah… okay.” Lakish nodded.

“Are you going to go look for her?”

After a moment’s thought, Lakish answered, “I don’t think so. If she went away on purpose, she probably doesn’t want to show her face to us now. If we try and see her anyways, she might eat us.”

“Definitely.” Collon nodded with a grave look.

“A wise judgement,” said Panival.

“... Tiat?” Lakish called out to the only one who still hadn’t joined in on their conversation.

“Eh? Ah, what? Sorry, I wasn’t listening.” Tiat, who was lying listlessly on the floor with all limbs spread out, jolted up at the mention of her name.

“Is something wrong, Tiat? Recently your mind seems to always be off somewhere else.”

“Nnnn.” Tiat was aware herself, but struggled to find an answer. “... I don’t really know. My head’s just like empty.”

“Is it because of Kutori?” Lakish asked

Tiat felt a sharp pain in her chest, but she couldn’t comprehend why. So she decided to ignore it.

“Maybe? I don’t know…” Tiat shrugged her shoulders and dodged the question.

Slowly, but surely, time passed. One day, then another, and another. The flow of time winded on and on, indifferent to the concepts of life and death.

No matter how hard he looked, Willem could see no irregularities in the magic flowing through Kutori. Trying to ignore the headache resulting from his use of spell vision, he took the girl’s small, pale, and cold hand. He gently massaged a few points on her palm near the base of her fingers.

“-- A long time ago, there was a guy who passed out from a really bad case of Acute Venom Poisoning and never woke up. This technique finally got him out of his coma. It corrects the flow a little bit at a time, without over stimulating the body…”

Willem knew there was no point in doing this. Unlike the comrade he once saved, Kutori had no actual problems with the Venom in her body. There were no points where the flow needed to be corrected. The cause of her sleep was something much different.

No matter what techniques Willem tried, she showed no signs of improving. But he couldn’t help but keep trying. There might be some effect, even if it’s small. He clung to that faint hope which cannot even be called a possibility. In order to avert his eyes from the ugly truth, he needed to keep trying.

He never got to say ‘welcome back’.

He never got to hear ‘I’m home’.

He was driven on by the fantasy that there existed some method which could save him from drowning in his sea of regrets.

“Willem.” A voice called to him from behind.

“... hey, it feels like it’s been a while, Naigrat.”

“I guess so. Sorry, I’ve been out for a bit. Whenever someone dies, I feel like my heart’s going to break. Then I feel like I’m weird for being so sad, like I should be used to it by now, but I don’t want to think about it and my head just becomes a mess. So I usually head inland and take it out on some trees and bears.”

Willem felt sorry for those trees and bears.

“It’s weird, huh? When I get like this, my appetite disappears, even though such soft and delicious looking meat is sitting right in front of me…”

“Well I guess that means you’re no longer fit to be a troll.”

“Maybe. I wonder if I can turn into something else.” The troll wearing her usual apron dress smiled weakly. “I’m tired of crying and getting angry all by myself.” Traces of exhaustion visibly showed on her face. “I know it’s awful, but I’m a little happy now that you’re here to cry over her too. I’m not alone anymore.”

“It really is awful, but I feel the same way.” Willem felt somewhat saved by Nagirat’s appearance.

“-- There are a few things I want to talk about. Will you follow me?”

“Something we can’t talk about here?”

“I don’t think I could do it. And I think it would be hard for you too.”

Willem understood what she meant. “Can I run away from this?”

“If you want to, I won’t stop you.”

Ahh, damn it. Now he couldn’t run away.

Naigrat’s room was dark.

Sitting there, Willem noticed a few things for the first time: it was night, and also raining outside.

“Sorry, this is the only lamp that still has oil in it,” Naigrat said as she placed a small reading lamp on the desk. A faint light illuminated the gloomy room. “Wine?”

“That’s odd, never seen anything but tea in this room.”

“We don’t have a fire to boil water, and besides…”

Willem could guess what she was trying to say without hearing the end of her sentence. A little alcohol would make it easier to talk about the subject at hand.

With a sigh, he asked, “So what did you want to talk about?”

“Ah--” Naigrat paused for a moment, as if struggling to find the right words to express something she didn’t want to say. “We need to start testing which sword is right for Tiat soon.”

“Ah…” Willem nodded. “Seniolis?”

“Mhm, how’d you know?”

“Whether or not that sword is being used makes a significant difference on the battlefield. Naturally, if its user becomes disabled you’d want to start looking for the next one right away. Well… the part of me that automatically thought of that as ‘natural’ makes me want to throw up though.”

“Well if you do throw up, I’ll at least pat you on the back while you do it. I feel the same way. But don’t forget that you’ll need to get used to it somewhat at least. This isn’t the first time this has happened, and it won’t be the last.”

“And each time it happens, the bears get a rude awakening from their hibernation.”

“Hey, at least I turn them into stew.”

That didn’t sound like a justification at all, but apparently Naigrat thought otherwise.

“Anyways, all this makes sense logically, but Seniolis is one god damn stubborn sword. It’s not gonna be like ‘okay, yes, please send in the next user’.”

“What do you mean?”

“In the first place, it’s one of the finest, if not the finest, holy sword ever made. It’s on a whole different level than other Kaliyons. And usually, the higher quality the sword, the pickier it is about choosing a user. Seniolis judges its candidates quite harshly.”

“You can’t do anything about that with your skills?”

“Of course not. If I could, I would have used that sword myself.” Willem chuckled, reminiscing about the past. “The first time I saw Seniolis, my master was using it. To be honest I hardly remember anything about that particular battle. Well, in the first place I hardly got to see anything. That’s how strong my master was with Seniolis.”

The two talked on and on throughout the night in that dimly lit room enveloped by shadow.

In order to accept the girl’s death.

To take the next step forward.

To prepare themselves for their new everyday lives without Kutori which now began.

Chapter 5: A Distant Dream, and Then

When she came to, the girl found herself standing amidst shadowy ruins.

The small corpse of a child lay on the ground before her. The cause of death appeared to be the large, gaping sword wound in her chest. The blood flowing out of it dyed her entire body in a dark, muddy red.

As the girl stared at the corpse, it suddenly began to waver. Then, a half transparent version of the child rose up and stood on top of her own corpse which still had not budged from the ground.

The ghostly child stared back at the girl.

After a moment, the child held out her hand.

-- *Ah. Does she want me to hold it?* The girl reached out and clasped the child's hand with both of her own.

The child laughed.

The girl also laughed, as if it had spread over to her.

The child then began running all around, dragging the girl along.

The ruins were vast, with more than enough to explore on their little adventure. Every time they went around a corner or stepped over a broken gate, they discovered something new. An oddly shaped stuffed animal, a battered and bruised picture book, a complicated looking

recording crystal. But the girl paid no attention to any of those curious objects and instead kept running and running through the ruins.

Maybe she's looking for something, the girl thought. She decided to ask, and the child responded with a firm nod.

"Jay! Ebo!"

The girl didn't quite understand what the child was talking about, but she looked excited and happy, so it must have been something she really liked. The girl tried asking if whatever she was looking for was within the ruins, but her question was met with a quizzical look. Maybe it was too complicated. The girl decided to ask something simpler, something she probably should have asked first: the child's name.

"Elq!"

Ah, Elq. That's a cute name, the girl responded, trying to be polite. The child then pointed at the girl and tilted her head. *Oh, are you asking for my name?*

The child nodded eagerly. She was right. It's proper manners to give your own name when asking for someone else's.

My name is…

My name…

Confused, the girl paused. She couldn't remember. Not just her name, but who she was. Why she was here. What these ruins were.

Elq gave her another quizzical look.

I… oh, that's right. I had something I needed to do. Someone I needed to meet. I don't have time to be wandering around here. So… so…

"...?" Another questioning look from Elq.

I need to go home, the girl told the child. *There are people waiting for me. I need to go to where I belong*.

"You *need* to?"

Yes. I need to.

"Even though there'll be a lot of sad things?"

I know, but that doesn't matter. There's someone I want to meet. There's a reason I need to live.

"Aw, okay." Elq drooped her head with a lonely look in her eyes. After a short silence, she released the girl's hand. "See you later then, Kutori."

-- Eh?

"-- Huh?"

Kutori woke up. Slowly, she tried raising her body. A heavy fatigue enveloped her entire body, as if she had overslept after staying up too late. She pressed her hand against her forehead, suppressing a light headache.

It felt like she had seen a long dream. She couldn't clearly remember what it was about, but it somehow felt warm and frightening at the same time. Quite the weird dream.

Wait, before that, there was something she needed to check first. She patted her body all over. It was unmistakably the body of Kutori Nota Seniolis.

"I'm… alive?"

Her head felt unusually clear, with no trace of that violent torrent of strange images anywhere in sight. What was going on?

A loud and rather un-ladylike rumbling sounded from her body. Kutori realized that she was starving. As she stepped out into the hallway to get something from the kitchen, she realized something else: it was night, and also raining outside. Because of that, the entire warehouse seemed to be shrouded in a quiet darkness--

She spotted a faint light leaking out from one of the rooms. Naigrat's room.

"..."

She sneakily tip toed up to the door.

"I wanted to make Kutori happy."

-- Eek! Her heart jumped.

"There's too much tragedy and unhappiness around Seniolis. There was a time when I wanted to do something about that, but of course I couldn't do anything. I was always too weak. I couldn't be useful to anyone. I worked my ass off and managed to get decent at fighting, but I had nothing left."

What were these people talking about?

"-- I thought I knew that, but in the end I couldn't leave her alone. But still, what could she possibly like about such a good for nothing guy?" Willem asked in a completely bewildered voice.

Whaat? You can't even figure out such a simple thing? Kutori teased him in her mind. *You showed me a lot of firsts. You were the first to save me, back in the Briki Shopping District. You were the first to bring me up to a high viewing platform in the middle of a city. You were the first to show me so many different faces. You were the first to bring out so many different emotions in me. You were the first person that let me rely on them. You were the first to try to help me, and the first to actually do so. You were the first opponent I lost to… the list goes on and on!*

And so of course, you were the first person I fell in love with.

"-- You should at least know that much, dummy," Kutori whispered with a smile.

"Ahhhhh!?" A sudden scream rang throughout the quiet hallway.

Looking to her side, she spotted a wide eyed Tiat standing frozen, pointing at Kutori.

"K-K-K-Kutori!? A ghost!??" She finally managed to blurt out after a good amount of stuttering.

No I'm alive I'm not a ghost so be quiet they'll hear you! Of course, Kutori couldn't shout that out, so she instead wildly waved her hands about, trying to signal Tiat to stop.

But, she didn't. "Kutori!!!" Tiat leaped onto her and hugged her tightly. "A-A ghost, but still Kutori!!"

Tiat's arms remained fastened around Kutori's waist as she spouted some nonsense. It looked like there was no escape. Well, Kutori didn't necessarily want to run away from Tiat, but she didn't want the two in the room behind her to notice.

Apparently, however, it was too late.

"-- Kutori?"

She heard a murmur of disbelief. Slowly, Kutori turned around. And of course, *he* stood there.

“Um…”

Willem was standing there frozen, at an utter loss for words. She couldn’t tell if he was sad, happy, angry, or something completely different. His face showed a sloppy menagerie of emotions, and, knowing that they were all because of her, Kutori also turned speechless.

“... what a day.” Naigrat was the first to recover from the confused stupor that the situation had put the four of them in. “Well? You don’t need to find the perfect words. You have something to say first, don’t you?”

“Ah… ah, you’re right.” Willem finally recovered as well and took a step towards Kutori. “Welcome back, Kutori.”

At that moment, every part of Kutori’s body seemed to suddenly abandon its duty. Tears welled up in her eyes and obscured her vision, her chest tightened and her breathing stopped, her legs buckled and became unable to walk, her head turned blank and all attempts at thinking ended in failure, her throat quivered and struggled to produce a voice.

“Ah… uh…”

I’m home. No matter how hard she tried, Kutori couldn’t get her body to speak those words. Even though she had been wanting to say them for so long. She had been preparing herself to say them for so long. Even though she had made up her mind to go all out once they met again, in front of him now she had lost all control over her body.

Her legs, having lost all the strength in them, finally slipped… probably. Kutori’s five senses had descended into a state of chaos, unable to produce any reliable information. Her sense of balance, however, remained intact. For a moment, a floating sensation enveloped her body. Then, right as she recognized that she was falling, something warm embraced her entire body.

“Welcome home.” That warm something gave her warm words as well.

Those words completely destroyed Kutori. She couldn’t see anything. Couldn’t hear anything. She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t walk, couldn’t think, couldn’t speak. Driven by an impulse which welled up from somewhere even deeper inside of her than her heart, she simply cried.

Soon enough, sleepy little fairies rubbing their sleepy little eyes began popping out into the hallway, trying to see what all the commotion was about.

Meanwhile, Kutori continued to sob loudly like a baby.

“... a miracle of love?” Nephren titled her head.

“Well putting aside the love part for now, I think we can all agree it’s a miracle. Although it may be one of those that comes with a price…” Aiseia said, still with a smile despite being on the verge of tears. “Knowing this kid, she probably paid it without thinking about it.”

Eventually, Kutori’s loud sobbing diminished until it became no more than barely audible weeping. And then, the rumbling of a stomach echoed loudly throughout the dimly lit hallway.